

**“CHOOSING SIDES” – by Rt. Rev. Bradley D. Heinrichs**

**Lesson 1 – Joshua 24:14-27**

**14** *“Now therefore, fear Jehovah, serve Him in integrity and in truth, and put away the gods which your fathers served on the other side of the River and in Egypt. Serve Jehovah!”*

**15** *And if it seems evil to you to serve Jehovah, choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve Jehovah.”*

**16** *So the people answered and said: “Far be it from us that we should forsake Jehovah to serve other gods;*

**17** *for Jehovah our God is He who brought us and our fathers up out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage, who did those great signs in our sight, and preserved us in all the way that we went....*

**18** *We also will serve Jehovah, for He is our God.”*

**19** *But Joshua said to the people, “You cannot serve Jehovah, for He is a holy God. He is a jealous God; He will not forgive your transgressions nor your sins.*

**20** *If you forsake Jehovah and serve foreign gods, then He will turn and do you harm and consume you, after He has done you good.”*

**21** *And the people said to Joshua, “No, but we will serve Jehovah!”*

**22** *So Joshua said to the people, “You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen Jehovah for yourselves, to serve Him.” And they said, “We are witnesses!”*

**23** *“Now therefore,” he said, “put away the foreign gods which are among you, and incline your heart to Jehovah God of Israel.”*

**24** *And the people said to Joshua, “Jehovah our God we will serve, and His voice we will obey!”*

**25** *So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and made for them a statute and a judgment in Shechem.*

**26** *Then Joshua wrote these words in the Book of the Law of God. And he took a large stone, and set it up there under the oak that was by the sanctuary of Jehovah.*

**27** *And Joshua said to all the people, “Behold, this stone shall be a witness to us, for it has heard all the words of Jehovah which He spoke to us. It shall therefore be a witness to you, lest you deny your God.”*

## **Lesson 2 – Leviticus 26:3-17**

*3 'If you walk in My statutes and keep My commandments, and do them,  
4 then I will give you rain in its season, the land shall yield its produce, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit.*

*5 Your threshing shall last till the time of vintage, and the vintage shall last till the time of sowing; you shall eat your bread to the full, and dwell in your land safely.*

*6 I will give peace in the land, and you shall lie down, and none will make you afraid; I will rid the land of evil wild beasts, and the sword will not go through your land.*

*9 'For I will look on you favorably and make you fruitful, multiply you and confirm My covenant with you....*

*14 'But if you do not obey Me, and do not observe all these commandments,*

*15 and if you despise My statutes, or if your soul abhors My judgments, so that you do not perform all My commandments, but break My covenant,*

*16 I also will do this to you: I will even appoint terror over you, wasting disease and fever which shall consume the eyes and cause sorrow of heart. And you shall sow your seed in vain, for your enemies shall eat it.*

*17 I will set My face against you, and you shall be defeated by your enemies. Those who hate you shall reign over you, and you shall flee when no one pursues you.*

*22 I will also send wild beasts among you, which shall rob you of your children ....*

*27 'And after all this, if you do not obey Me, but walk contrary to Me,*

*28 then I also will walk contrary to you in fury; and I, even I, will chastise you seven times for your sins ....*

*38 You shall perish among the nations, and the land of your enemies shall eat you up.*

## **Lesson 3 – Luke 16:13**

*No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.*

## **Lesson 4 – Apocalypse Explained 365:14**

*This describes the source of peace, that is, of heaven and heavenly joy.... A person has heaven from living according to the commandments, for [by living according to the commandments a person] has conjunction with the Lord.... Therefore it is said, "If you walk in My statutes, and keep My commandments, and do them, I will give peace in the land."*

*That then they would not be infested by evils and falsities is meant by "they would lie down, and none would make [them] afraid," and by "Jehovah will rid the land of evil wild beasts, and the sword shall not pass through it," "the evil wild beasts" signifying evil lusts, and "the sword" falsities therefrom.*

*[For evil lusts and falsities] destroy good and truth from which is peace.*

## **Lesson 5 – True Christian Religion 371:6**

*Mutual conjunction (of the Lord with man is effected) by cooperation. For the Lord acts, and from Him man receives action, and operates as if of himself.... This operation of man from the Lord is imputed to him as his own, because he is held constantly by the Lord in freedom of choice. The freedom of choice resulting from this is the ability to will and to think from the Lord, that is, from the Word, and also the ability to will and to think from the devil, that is, contrary to the Lord and the Word. This freedom the Lord gives to man to enable him to conjoin himself reciprocally with the Lord, and by this conjunction he is gifted with eternal life and blessedness.*

***“If you walk in My statutes, and keep My commandments and do them ..., I will give peace in the land, and you shall lie down, and none shall make afraid.... But if you do not obey Me, and do not observe all these commandments, and if you despise My statutes ..., I will even appoint terror over you, and...you shall perish among the nations.”*** (Leviticus 26:3,6,14-16,38)

These words give an extremely clear and concise illustration of the consequences resulting from our decision to either obey the Lord’s commandments or disobey them. Our own free choice will ultimately decide if we enjoy peace, happiness, and security – or endure chaos, misery, and terror. In the most basic terms, every time we freely make a spiritual choice, it is between life and death! Obey and prosper – disobey and perish!

During the Cathedral Family Service this morning a young adult confessed her faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and her desire and intention to follow His commandments. In this idealistic state, often the choice seems very clear. Why wouldn’t you want to follow the Lord, obey His commandments and prosper, as opposed to disobeying them, being miserable, and ultimately perishing?

Unfortunately, as we enter into adult life, rarely do things go as smoothly as we might have hoped! Things that were clear before can become murky. Black and white choices give way to endless shades of grey. Clarity gradually disappears as confusion and doubt creep in.

This is part of making our faith our own, and the Heavenly Doctrine devotes much attention to these intermediate states talking about progression, advancing forward little by little, and the mediate goods and false appearances that can be serviceable to a good end. In these states, the hells love to introduce doubts and confuse us as much as they can. Even to the point where we think that white may be black, or that the raven may be white, or that maybe there is no real difference at all. This is where it is useful to step back and look at all the places where the Lord tries to make our choices as simple and as clear as possible.

The idea of two basic choices goes right back to the infancy of the human race.

Think about it – the simple choice between life and death was clearly portrayed right at the beginning of the Scriptures. ***“Out of the ground Jehovah God made every tree grow that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. The tree of life was also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.... And Jehovah God commanded the man, saying, "Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die”*** (Genesis 2:9,16-17). Two trees. One gave life – the other brought death. An obvious choice to make, right? But some chose death. “Why” is the question we will discuss later.

Now fast forward to the time of Joshua and consider his words to the Israelites from our first lesson. ***“Serve Jehovah! And if it seems evil to you to serve Jehovah, choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods which your fathers served..., or the gods of the Amorites. But as for me and my house, we will serve Jehovah”*** (Joshua 24:14-16).

Again, a clear choice is presented. Serve the Lord who rescued them from all their troubles in Egypt and brought them to the heavenly land of Canaan, or serve the useless idols and powerless gods of the other nations. And do you know what they chose? Very shortly, after Joshua’s death they chose to serve Baal.

Now skip ahead around five hundred years to the time of the great prophet Elijah, when he asked the people on Mount Carmel: ***“How long will you falter between two opinions? If Jehovah is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him.’ But the people answered him not a word.”*** (I Kings 18:21). Why couldn’t they answer such an easy question? Why did it take a great miracle from the Lord through Elijah to convince them that He was God? Why did Elijah have to mock Baal to prove to them that he was a lifeless hunk of wood? Certainly, that should have been obvious!

All these examples from the Word paint a very black and white picture of the

choices that we must make. They are ultimately choices between spiritual life and spiritual death. An easy, clear, and obvious choice to make between such extreme opposites. So why did the children of Israel struggle with this and why do we often do the same?

The problem for many of us is that life seems to have endless shades of gray. Often, our choices do not appear to be between black and white, but rather between a warm gray and a cool gray. However, the Writings encourage us to scratch below the surface, because then frequently the true color begins to shine through. The cool gray starts to look more and more black, and the warm gray a little bit whiter and brighter.

Think about your average day. You make thousands of choices. But most of those choices do not seem to be of the “life and death” variety. Many times, they seem very generic and neutral. Making a few personal photocopies at work, holding the door for the person behind you, greeting a cashier with a smile. No dramatic choices there. However, each one could be of the life and death variety, because they establish patterns of behavior in us and start to cement our ruling love.

The Heavenly Doctrine tells us that in the final analysis all our choices stem from four basic loves. Two good and two evil. Love to the Lord and love towards the neighbor are the good ones – and the love of the world and the love of self and ruling over others are the evil ones.

There are no shades of gray that connect these four loves together. They are polar opposites. In the spiritual world, love to the Lord is the highest love and the ruling love of the celestial kingdom. Love towards the neighbor, is just below and it rules in the spiritual kingdom. Then comes the world of spirits. Below the world of spirits is the satanic hell where love of the world rules. And beneath that the diabolical hell, where love of self and dominion over others rules.

Now let’s go back to the world of spirits. The world of spirits is described as a “*great gulf fixed*” between heaven and hell so that no one can be on both sides at the same

time (Luke 16:26; AC 10659:4; DP 100; TCR 455:2, 475). The world of spirits is also called in the Heavenly Doctrine the *“the valley of decision”* (Joel 3:14; AE 526:4). The picture of the world of spirits as an intermediate space between heaven and hell is an important one for us to visualize (DLW 140). It helps us to picture the state of equilibrium we are kept in, because while we are on this earth our rational minds make their homes in the world of spirits (HH 597). This is a vital concept because that equilibrium provides the great gift of freedom in spiritual things which we are given by the Lord (AE 349). The Lord avidly protects this freedom in us to choose between good and evil. In fact, we are told that *“the Lord guards freedom in a person, as a person guards the pupil of his eye”* (DP 97).

So because there is this great gulf fixed between the two heavenly loves and the two hellish loves, it is crucial that we know which loves are directing our choices. The Heavenly Doctrine says that if you examine your actions, you will discover a little. If you examine your thoughts, you will discover more. And that if you examine your intentions you will discover all (Charity 5).

In the example of making a few personal photocopies at work. It could be that when examined as to intentions, a person could be doing it from the love of the world saving a few pennies at the expense of the employer. However, it could also be from a love of the neighbor and wanting to be more productive at work by not wanting to go out to Staples over lunchtime and risk coming back late. You could hold the door for someone or smile at the cashier from a selfish love of reputation, honor, and reward, or from a genuine desire to love our neighbor and treat them as we know the Lord would want us to.

The point is that if we make it a regular practice to reflect on our choices, we can learn a lot about ourselves. If we take time to trace back our choices from our actions, to our thoughts, to our intentions – we will likely find that we were motivated by one of those

four loves. We either chose from good or we chose from evil, there is that great gulf fixed between them.

There are perilous spiritual consequences when we try to straddle that gulf. If we are “spiritual fence sitter” who tries to have the best of both worlds – the evils and falsities of hell and the goods and truths of heaven – we mix the two together in our minds and profane them (AR 202). This is like the person who says that they would like to spend the work week in heaven being useful, but have weekends off in hell to indulge themselves in sensual appetites. The Lord warns us against the heinous consequences of trying to mix what is good and evil together many times.

He sent Elijah to ask the children of Israel, ***“How long will you falter between two opinions? If Jehovah is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him”*** (I Kings 18:21). Likewise, He instructed His disciples, ***“No servant can serve two masters – You cannot serve God and mammon”*** (Luke 16:13). The Lord also gave this graphic admonition to the Laodiceans in the Book of Revelation: ***“You are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot. So then because you are neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth.”*** (Rev. 3:15-16).

This forceful warning describes the consequences of having a divided mind. When we try to straddle the great gulf between good and evil in our minds, we end up hanging between the two extremes and are torn apart internally (AC 2449:2, 4424:1).

The message is clear we cannot be neither cold nor hot by trying to follow both Jehovah and Baal – by trying to serve God and mammom (AC 9093:2). We must choose one or the other, or else we will commit the most grievous sin of profanation, and be vomited out of the Lord’s mouth.

So, we have to choose a side. And the Lord tries to make that decision easy for us, as we saw in our lessons. He made the choice obvious. As the Lord told us in our recitation, ***“This commandment which I command you today is not too mysterious for you, nor is it***

*far off*” (Deuteronomy 30:11). If you choose to obey My commandments, then you will have happiness, peace, and prosperity. If you choose to disobey My commandments, then you will endure misery, chaos, and perish.

The same basic choice remains for us today as it did so many thousand years ago. There are two trees in the garden. The “Tree of Life,” and the “Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.” Will we follow the Lord and obey His commands, or will we want to lead ourselves and do what we want even if it is against what He teaches? The Lord asks us to choose today whom we will serve. We must choose sides. We can’t remain in the middle and *“falter between two opinions.”* So who will it be? Jehovah or Baal? God or Mammon? The Lord Jesus Christ or yourself? Will we choose to walk in His statutes and keep His commandments, or to disobey them? Will we choose heaven or hell?

The confession and confirmation of faith that happened earlier this morning provides a perfect occasion for us all to recommit ourselves to following the Lord. In the final analysis, if we examine our intentions to see what loves are motivating us, we will see that it really is black and white. It is a gradual process to gain this kind of clarity, but the celestial angels reach a point where they *“say no more than Yea, yea, or Nay, nay”* (AC 10786, Matt. 5:37). Once you strip away all the shades of gray, our freedom to choose essentially boils down to a binary decision between good and evil. The Lord gave us our freedom and rationality to help us make this critical choice between life and death. The decision is in our hands and the Lord has made the choice obvious, in fact, He even gives us the answer in these words: *“I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live”* (Deuteronomy 30:19). **Amen.**