

CHAPTER 2

CHOICES: LIFE OR DEATH

“It doesn’t matter if you win or loose; it’s how you play the game.” You hear this tossed around by parents of young athletes. Not wanting to discourage their child’s participation, the goal of winning is downplayed. Nevertheless the way you approach any undertaking is critical—for *it doesn’t matter if you win or loose until you loose*. At that point winning or loosing can be of upmost importance.

In the business world, success is winning and failure is loosing. In the military, life and death issues are obviously front and center. Loosing is permanent. Likewise the Bible tells us that spiritual life and death are of eternal importance. For the non-believer physical death brings eternal separation from God—the ultimate loss. While Christians are secure regarding eternal life, each day they must make choices leading to life or death. Life is to experience fellowship with Christ, while death is the loss of that experience. By making wise moment-by-moment choices, fellowship with Christ and enriched living is possible. On the other hand, foolish decisions result in the forfeiture of fellowship, a separation from or dying to God in daily experience.

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Eternal Life and Death

Different from *temporal* or daily living or dying, *eternal life and death are not based on daily decisions*. At birth mankind is spiritually separated from God due to sin (see chart 2-1). Scripture tells us, “God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners [being spiritually dead], Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8). Through Christ’s death, God’s justice for all the sins of the whole world is satisfied (1 John 2:2). Now a relationship between Himself and man can be established, but each person must trust in Christ for eternal life in order for that new standing to become a personal reality.¹ Rather than an offer to be rejected or accepted, eternal life is a gift received through faith alone in Christ alone.² At the new birth, faith is the persuasion in the trustworthiness of Jesus to provide eternal life. Eternal life is, as it implies, everlasting. It begins at salvation and has no end. For those who do not trust in Christ, spiritual death is also everlasting. It also has no end.



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There are numerous texts contrasting eternal life and eternal death. In each case, a person either has one or the other, not both. That is their position before God. God sees the believer as a new person based on His work of regeneration, redemption and accredited righteousness. On the other hand, a person who has not placed his faith in Christ is forever lost and separated from God.

John 3

When Nicodemus came to Jesus, the topic of eternal life and death was at the heart of their conversation. Jesus told Nicodemus he must be born again to “see the kingdom” (John 3:3) or “enter into the kingdom” (v 5) of God. Spiritual birth was necessary since physical birth left a person spiritual dead, being unable to please God. Eternal life with God was based on belief in His Son: “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life” (v 16).

The *saving message* was, and continues to be, *believe in Christ alone for eternal life*. No longer spiritually dead and eternally separated from God, those who trust in Christ are safe and secure, having life that will never end. This life that is everlasting begins the moment one believes. He said, “I came that they may have life, and have *it* abundantly” (10:10b). Eternal life is also a present reality that can be experienced now. As the Christian lives in fellowship with Christ, sharing in the eternal life of God, abundant living is possible.

Ephesians 2

In Ephesians 2:1-7, Paul provided perspective to the death-versus-life contrast. He began with *man’s problem* (vv 1-3). Men are separated from God because of sin. “You were dead in your trespasses and sin (v 1). They are spiritually dead because they have fallen short of God’s standard of holiness. Belonging to the world system and under Satan’s rule, they are in open rebellion as God’s enemies with their self-centered behavior striving to satisfy longings and imagined needs. The outcome of men’s corrupt nature is to be under God’s judgment.

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Paul, then, moved to *God's solution* (vv 4-7). "You were dead" (v 1), "But God...made us alive" (v 5). God's love and compassion for mankind demonstrates itself in three gracious ways. God chooses to give men spiritual life (v 5), to raise them in spiritual resurrection (v 6), and to position them spiritually with Christ in heaven (v 6). Believers in Christ are now alive to God, raised, and seated in heaven. Their eternal destiny is secure, which is confirmed in Ephesians 2:19 since they are now citizens of heaven. God's compassionate acts testify to His unending and overflowing richness to those He gives spiritual life, those who are eternal trophies to His grace, love and mercy.³

Romans 5–6

In Romans 5:12, Paul wrote concerning the effect of Adam's sin: "Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned." Adam's original sin resulted in both spiritual and physical death for all of mankind. Everyone is under the dominion of sin from physical birth. Unless God intervenes, mankind lives spiritually alienated from Him and then eternally separated both physically and spiritually at death.

Fortunately, God's free gift of grace through Christ provided the way of salvation for all men: "But the free gift is not like the transgression. For if by the transgression of the one the many died, much more did the grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one Man, Jesus Christ, abound to the many" (v 15). Paul further explained in Romans 6 that through a person's co-death, co-burial, and co-resurrection with Christ believers are released from their bondage to sin (vv 4-6). No longer spiritually dead, their position in Christ guarantees eternal life. In addition, the new position before God opens the door to be able to please God through righteous living (5:17-21; 6:12-23). Believers can experience life to the fullest as well as life that is everlasting.

Eternal Judgment

Individuals who do not believe in Christ for eternal live will be

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judged at the Great White Throne: “Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat upon it...and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds” (Rev 20: 11a, 12c). At that judgment God will evaluate the non-believers’ works to show that there was nothing they could have done to merit eternal life. Everlasting life is a free gift through faith in Christ alone, apart from works either to obtain or sustain salvation.

Temporal Life and Death

While eternal life usually refers to a believer’s continual presence with God at the end of time, that is not the only benefit of faith in Christ. A born-again person can experience that life now. Abundant life (John 10:10b) in this present world becomes a reality by thinking and living as Jesus lived and taught. On the other hand, everyday choices a believer makes that are contrary to God’s Word lead to separation from God, a loss of fellowship with Christ.

Luke 15

In the parable of the Prodigal Son (or better still the parable of the Waiting Father; Luke 15:11-32), we see the willful defiance of the youngest son. After some time away and realizing the futility of his foolish decision, the son decided to go home. The passage tells that the father caught a glimpse of him some distance away. Rather than waiting for his wayward boy to make the long walk home, the father ran to meet him, smothering him with hugs and kisses. It is obvious that the father’s first thought was, “He has returned to me.”

Yes, it is a fact that for an extended time the son experienced a way of life in the “far country,” poles apart from the one he had left. However, on his return, the father’s major concern was not what the young man had done, but rather that he had chosen to come back. Amidst a flood of tears and an emotional outpouring of love for his son, the father’s first words would have been, “Welcome home.” If you are a parent, you can identify

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with him as you reflect on the times your own children have made foolish choices, maybe even left home and then returned.

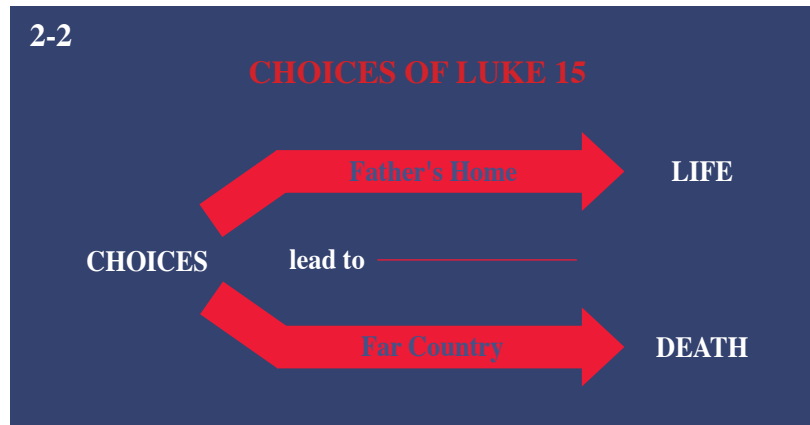
Luke wrote that the son's return home was a matter of life and death. The father said, "This son of mine was dead and has come to life again" (Luke 15:24; cf. 32). Knowing a word's meaning and use in a particular context is critical. Death means *separation*. To understand it's meaning in a passage the question must be asked, "Separation from what?" Death can be understood as eternal separation from God (a relationship issue), loss of physical life, or temporal separation from God (a fellowship issue). The intended use of life likewise has various options: eternal life, physical life, or abundant life. Obviously, the father was not speaking of physical life and death. The wording "has come to life again" indicates a prior life that preceded the son's travel to a far county, which Luke equated as being as good as dead. The point is that death in this passage signifies the loss of companionship or fellowship, the mutual sharing of life experiences by the son and the father. When the son was absent, common experiences were absent. Only after returning home could their intimacy be restored. To impose a singular-initial-salvation interpretation on this passage is to fail to understand a significant portion of the text. An established relationship between father and son is understood. The variable is their fellowship—did it exist or not? When there are shared experiences with God, there is life, without them there is death, an absence of fellowship.⁴

Options facing believers regarding the "far country" and the "father's home" are illustrated in Chart 2-2.

Supplement Repentance in Context

Repentance may be understood in three different ways: (1) a change of behavior, (2) a change of mind about Christ, or (3) a change of mind regarding one's sins. The author gives

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extensive support for the third option in an earlier work.⁵ Repentance is coming to grips with the realization of one's unfaithfulness and disobedience. This is not only the intent of Luke 15 but for the rest of Scripture.

Remember the historical context of the parable of the Prodigal Son involved the coming of the King and His offer of the promised kingdom. The rebellious Nation of Israel was being called back to God in preparation for the establishment of the kingdom when John the Baptist announced, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. 3:2). Calling Israel to repent from its waywardness and turn again to God is the setting of the Baptist's and Christ's earthly ministry and Luke 15 as well. As such, in Luke 15 national repentance and individual trust in the Messiah was the issue.

The concept of repentance must conform to its historical framework. This particularly is true for the major passage universally used in order to explain repentance—Luke 15. This familiar text contains three parables that build to a crescendo, moving from the lost sheep (vv 3-7), to the lost coin (vv 8-10), to the lost son (vv 11-32). In Luke 15:1-2, the issue is the religious leaders' continual fixation on Christ's association with sinners,

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those for whom He has come to “call...to repentance” (5:32). Jesus’ seeking-and-calling ministry was addressed primarily to the nation Israel, wanting them to repent and return again to their God. This is the intent of Luke 15. When something is lost and then found, whether a sheep or a coin or a son, it is cause for rejoicing (vv 7, 10, 22-24). When a sinner repents and returns to his heavenly Father, joy in heaven is the result. The wayward son finally came to the realization that he had sinned against his father through his defiant and ungrateful behavior (v 18). The parallel between the rebellious nation and the unruly son is in view.⁶

Exchanged-Life

Jesus taught the exchanged-life paradox (*save life to lose life; lose life to save life*) at different times to different people: (1) Matthew 10; (2) Matthew 16; Mark 8; Luke 9; (3) Luke 14; (4) Luke 17; and (5) John 12.⁷ It is critical to note the timing of this teaching. All five occurred during the last year of Christ’s three-and-a-half-year ministry when Jesus began to stress discipleship.⁸

On each of these five occasions, the message was addressed to believers and the content focused on the cost of following Christ as a committed disciple. In His last year of ministry, His messages took a different tone as His teaching becoming increasingly serious, adding demands for anyone who would follow Him. In familiar discipleship passages Jesus said, “If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23) and “If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother... even his own life, he cannot be My disciple” (Luke 14:26). Notice the difference from His previous interaction with Nicodemus (John 3:1-21) and the woman at the well (John 4:1-42). In those instances He did not even mention the cost of following Him.

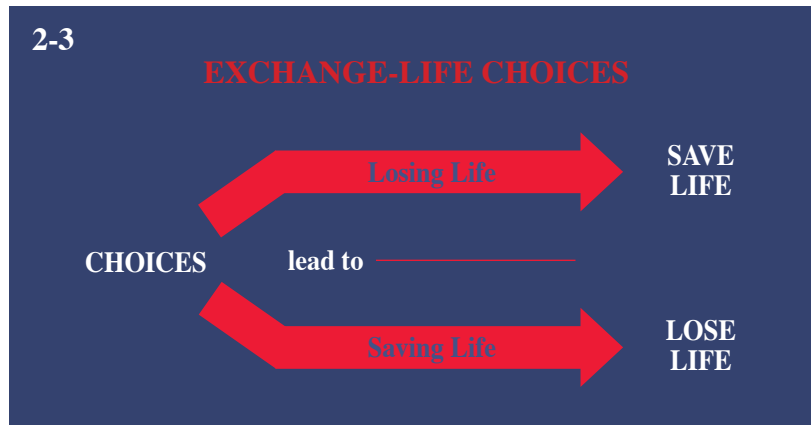
Late in His ministry, Jesus’ primary purpose was not to attract additional followers. Instead He was seeking the commitment of

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those who were already following. Establishing growing intimacy, allegiance, and dedication to Christ became the emphasis. This was the pattern being experienced by the Twelve. They were learning to value intimacy with Christ and a new way of living rather than pursuing their own interests. This is the same principle we found in John 8 from the previous chapter. Besides the Twelve, Jesus appealed to others to follow Him as committed disciples in order to experience real life. New thinking, motivation, and behavior were key to understanding the “secret of losing life to gain life.”

Seeing Jesus’ teaching on “saving your life” through the lens of its historical context gives us a clearer perspective. Certainly, He came to die for our sins but He also came to establish His Church, particularly through twelve men He chose and prepared. Jesus now urged others to follow Him so that they may know a new quality of life and share in this new undertaking. Only committed disciples would be able to experience life on a new level necessary to accomplish the task.

Chart 2-3 shows the two choice Christians face: whether (1) we hold on to our sinful desires and loose the experience of real life or (2) we embrace God’s will and find abundant life. Obviously, heaven and hell are not the issue in the exchanged-life texts. Eternal life is free through faith, but following Christ will cost you. He wants us to release our grasp on the world, our preoccupation with it’s culture and



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it's ways, so that we can experience and share the new fulfilling life He offers.

Romans 6

After presenting the Christian's position in Christ through co-death, burial, and resurrection with Him (Romans 6:1-11), Paul lays out the two alternatives set before the believer (vv 12-23). Christians can make themselves available (to place themselves at the disposal) either for obedience resulting in righteousness or for disobedience resulting in death (v 16).⁹

Do you not know that when you present [make available] yourselves to someone *as* slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin resulting in death, or of obedience resulting in righteousness?

Death in this context refers to a separation from fellowship with Christ. The same is true for the use of life in Romans 6. Life refers to experiencing intimacy and fellowship with Him. At the new birth Christians died and were raised with Christ, making them "alive to God" (v 11) and now have the potential to "walk in newness of life" (v 4). That possibility relates to everyday decisions. Who will you follow and serve?

Notice the progression in verse 19:

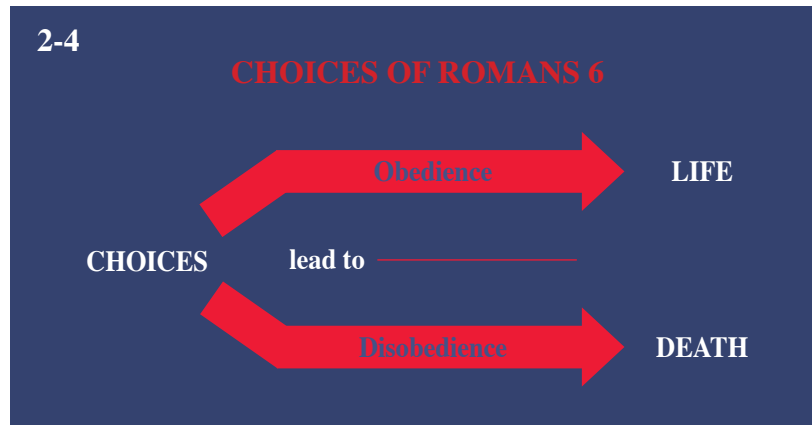
For just as you presented [make available] your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness, resulting in *further* lawlessness, so now present [make available] your members as slaves to righteousness, resulting in sanctification.

Righteousness leads to sanctification [experiencing life], while lawlessness (sin) leads to further lawlessness [experiencing death] (see chart 2-4).¹⁰

Romans 8

In Romans 8, Paul presented the contrast between life and death

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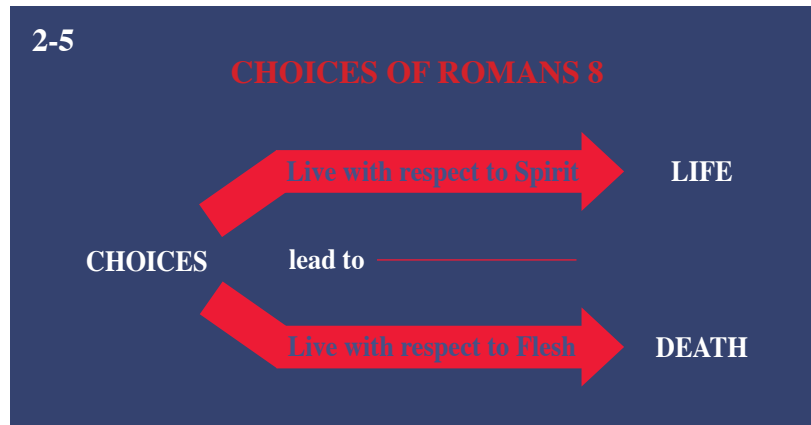
five times (vv. 2, 6, 10, 11, 13). Verses 12-13, written to believers, concludes the thought which began in verse 1.¹¹

So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live.

In this section of Romans 8, the apostle speaks of life or death. This theme parallels with that of the “home” and “far country” in the parable of the Waiting Father in Luke 15. In Romans 8, Paul explained that a believer could either *live according to the flesh* (“far country”) or *live according to the Spirit* (“father’s home”) (vv. 4-5, 12-13). A believer has the choice to live either way (see chart 2-5).

Decisions have consequences! Romans 8 makes it crystal clear that choices bring either death or life. In fact, *to live* according to the Spirit leads to *real living*. Abundant living (John 10:10b) is the result of walking under the influence of the Spirit. On the other hand, death is the consequence of walking under the influence of the flesh. Life and death are a present reality for the Christian. The option before every believer is *enriched living*, following Christ in discipleship and being in fellowship with Him, or *psuedo-living*, not enjoying His companionship and experiencing a loss of fellowship.

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Temporal Judgment

Like non-believers who will be judged by their works at the Great White Throne (Rev 20:11-12), believers in Christ will be judged by their works at the Judgment Seat of Christ: “For we [believers] must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad” (2 Cor 5:10). Each believer will be accountable for how they lived and the choices they made. Good works from godly choices will bring rewards, while bad works will be burned up (1 Cor 3:14-15).

Perspective Is Everything

In the Scripture, life and death can be both eternal and temporal. Context must determine the correct interpretation. To mislabel or overlook this has and will continue to create confusion. Believers are not only concerned with eternal life, but also life here and now, living in fellowship with Christ or separated from fellowship with Him. On the other hand, eternal death relates only to those who have not believed in Christ. They cannot do anything to earn everlasting life and will experience separation from God for all eternity. While *belief*

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in Christ is the basis of one's eternal future, daily *choices* are the key to present-time closeness to Christ or lost intimacy and deadness. The consequences and implications of the believer's decisions are central to the argument of this book.



