

“Trust Issues”

Genesis 12:1-5; Mark 1:16-20

May 2, 2021

There are some decisions you make that, once decided, change everything. Years ago, some of my friends convinced me to do an Outward Bound adventure in the Pisgah National Forest. Now look, they were all outdoorsy types, so this kind of thing was right up their alley. Me? Not so much, not really. And on the first day, I learned something which had me more than a little unnerved. You see, this school had a ropes course. You know, the type they have lots of places these days, the Whitewater center has one, I believe. But back then, in the early 90’s, they weren’t as prevalent.

But you see, I was a little bit scared of heights. The prospect of ascending into the treetops didn’t please me but the end of the course had me the most unnerved. At the end was a zip line which whisked you through the trees down to safe landing on the ground. It was called “the butt box” and as soon as you gave the instructors the high sign, whoosh, off you went.

I was really nervous that day, to say the least. I’d made it through the course and was literally sitting on the butt box fully strapped in for a wild ride. At first, I wasn’t going to do it. I sat there for a few indecisive minutes. Did I really want to do this? What if the line snaps? But, you see, the instructors told us – once you get to that point, there’s no turning back. Not easily at least. So, finally, mustering all the courage I had within me, I raised my hand, giving the high sign. I had made the decision, going forward was the only way out.

The second I did, I mean, like the second I raised my hand, away I went. Instantaneous free fall.

As I look back on that experience, what I am forced to realize is that the toughest part of the whole darned thing wasn’t the actual ropes course, nor the butt box itself. No, the most arduous task of all was making the decision to get up there in the first place.

And, if you’re like a growing number of us, decision making is tough. Making decisions will always be difficult because it takes time and energy to weigh your options. Things like second-guessing yourself and feeling indecisive are just a part of the process. In many ways, they’re a good thing—a sign that you’re thinking about your choices instead of just going with the flow. But regardless, decision-making requires time and energy when done correctly.

But life requires that we do so. One simply can’t be wishy-washy about all things, can you?

[Step 3 of the 12 Steps suggests that “Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God, as we understood Him. Now I’ve heard it said that this step is merely an action of the mind, somehow relegating in behind the so-called action steps. But the more and more I’m around this program, the more I see the vital significance of Step 3. Without it, we’re not very far removed from where we were to begin with – reliant on our individual strength alone to fight sin.

And, to be sure, making a decision to follow Jesus Christ is, I believe, a necessary and vital step to being an authentic Christian. That’s the point of this particular series – to help us understand how to be authentic Christians. After all, it’s pretty easy to say we’re Christian. After all, seldom will people question our assertion that we are, at least to our faces they might not. But I think we all recognize the difference between real faith and some ersatz, in-name-only variant of following Jesus Christ. The former holds the power of the Holy Spirit to transform the life of the believer as well as those in their lives while the other is merely a means of feeling good about oneself. Rather like switching seats on the Titanic. Feels like you’re doing something but not really altering much in the way of what’s going to happen.

Thankfully, the Bible gives us examples of people making decisions. This morning, we read again from Genesis 12. I read it last week as well if it seems overly familiar. In it, God approaches Abram with what was sure to seem an odd request – “Now the Lord said o Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

Okay, so here’s the tale of the tape on Abram. He’s the oldest living son of a wealthy man. At 75, he’s well past his youth and probably looking forward to little more than enjoying the sunset years of his life. But then, seemingly out of the blue, God appears. Now look, what he’s offering is pretty good. Prosperity, family, blessing others. But in order to see all that stuff happen, Abram has to decide – will he follow God’s command.

Abraham, he could've said no. After all, in Hebrews 11, Abraham is given great credit for his faith. The faith that led him to make a very important decision to actually do what God commanded. And I can only imagine that night. The night after God appeared. There, in the dark of night, I'm sure Abraham had misgivings. I'm sure he made his mind up only to change it again as the hours rolled on. But then, once his deliberations were through, he made a decision.

From that point on, the remainder of his life must've been metaphorically akin to the rush of me skirting through the trees on that zip line. From the moment the decision is truly made, everything changes. The effect is immediate, exhilarating, adrenaline-pumping.

God's people have historically been asked to make a decision, God chooses not to coerce our faith by taking away our free-will on the matter. This is a pattern long-established. As the people of God wander around in the wilderness, waiting to enter into the promised land, Moses urges the people to choose wisely.

Deuteronomy 30:15-18 – “See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God, that I command you today, by loving the Lord your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his rules, then you shall live and multiply, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to take possession of it. But if your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them, I declare to you today, that you shall surely perish. You shall not live long in the land that you are going over the Jordan to enter and possess.”

Moses urges the people of God to choose. His successor did, as well. After having occupied most of Canaan, Joshua summons God's people to join him in reaffirming their covenant with God. In a stirring speech, he declares in **Joshua 24:14-15**, “Now therefore fear the Lord and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness. Put away the gods that your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. And if it is evil in your eyes to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”

And just as God gives us the freedom to choose Him, sin enables us to choose the opposite. We see a couple examples of this in the Word. First is, of course, Jonah. He makes a *ahem* bad decision. After all, reading the Bible we'll discover the character of Jonah. Jonah, as we might remember, is also given a command from God. “Go to Tarshish, where you most detested enemies are, and tell them to repent, otherwise I'll destroy them.”

But you see, Jonah doesn't really want his nation's enemies spared. So, what does Jonah say? “Nah, I ain't doin' that.” Soon thereafter, he hops a ship going in the exact opposite direction from where the Lord is sending him. How does that work out for him? Not so great unless you count spending time inside a big fish's tummy has you feeling giddy.

And then, in yet another cautionary tale about making a decision for God and sticking with it, we learn in Acts of the Apostles about Ananias and Sapphira. Ananias and Sapphira are early Christian converts who, well, make some bad decisions.

Acts 5 teaches us about this husband and wife. They've made a decision to follow Jesus. Just one thing remains. They have a piece of property which they sell for a profit. Then, instead of offering the whole amount to God, they choose to hold a large portion of it back. Then, they lie about it. They both die reminding us that there ARE consequences for choosing wrongly.

But, for authentic Christians, choosing wrongly isn't something we're remotely afraid of. Why would that be? Well, authentic Christians recognize something right off the bat – while choosing God feels a whole lot like our work, our decision, the truth of the matter is different.

The great declaration of the Bible is that the only means by which any of us see the inside of heaven is through what Christ has already done. That is to say that you choose Him, only because He chose you first. The language the Scriptures most often use is that of “ransom” and “adoption” through Jesus Christ. That is to say that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. That is, on our behalf.

[Sandy quote – “you're good and you don't even know it.”]

Matthew 20:28 – “Even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

I Timothy 2:5-6 – “For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time.

1 Peter 1:18-19 – “...knowing that you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers, but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ.”

Ephesians 1:4b-5 – “In love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will,”

The Good News is that you won't make a wrong decision here, not if you're truly, authentically Christian. You can't, not really. Not ultimately. God's imprint on you, made known through your baptism, bears fruit as faith is actualized and we move from the simple, uninformed faith of our youth into the full bloom of adult faith. That is to say that to be authentically Christian, one embraces the idea that they contribute nothing to their own salvation. Jesus has done all the work. That we choose Him at all is ultimately the work of the Holy Spirit.

That does NOT mean such decision making is easy. After all, Jesus Himself suggests the difficulty in following Him, **Luke 9:23** – “And he said to all, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.”

Jesus even asks us to contemplate the cost of making a decision for him, weighing the consequences, **Luke 14:26-30** – “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple. For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, ‘This man began to build and was not able to finish.’”

So, consider the choice. Will it be Jesus, or will it be you? Because, you see, there can be only one victor in this and, spoiler alert, it isn't going to be you. No, God's will is sovereign and simply can't be denied.

But that doesn't mean it won't feel like choosing Him is your choice. After all, for a week a season or the majority of a lifetime, we can make the opposite choice. But then, one day, God will reveal His plans for our life for him.

The way I think about it is like this. Have you ever seen a magician do a card trick? I'm sure you have. Now look, while some of them are really imaginative and look quite difficult, most boil down to one trick – getting you to pick the card the magician wants. It leaves you feeling that you're free to choose but it also provides the magician with the results that will make the trick look like magic.

My sense is that this is a great way to think Scripturally about predestination and free will. One the one hand, we stand in front of the deck. We pull a card thinking it was freely chosen but, in reality, it wasn't, and the trick comes off.

Well, Jesus Christ here is the magician. He's arranged the deck of your life in such a fashion as to make choosing His card a wonderfully unavoidable reality.

And when you pick the Christ card, when you finally make that decision for Jesus, things are going to get exciting...fast.

You're high up on the ropes course strapped into that butt box. You raise your hand, and, whoosh away you go.

I want to close with a story Billy Graham used to tell. Billy Graham tells a story that beautifully illustrates how faith necessarily entails trust and leads to making a momentous decision. To paraphrase the story: A brave man pushes a wheelbarrow back and forth along a tightrope suspended high above Niagara Falls. The crowd watches in astonishment as the agile acrobat continues to push the wheelbarrow back and forth over the deadly, roaring falls. Then the man places a 200-pound sack of dirt in the wheelbarrow and boldly makes his way across the falls, pushing the heavy load through the misty air. Making his way back, the tightrope walker points to a man in the crowd and asks, “Do you believe I can push a man in the wheelbarrow across the falls?”

The excited onlooker says, “Yes, of course.” The acrobat points directly at the man and says, “Get in!” Are you ready to make a decision for Jesus? All you have to do is just get in the wheelbarrow.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.