

BRAINS AND HEARTS TO CHOOSE LIFE
A Devotional Meditation from
Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Proverbs 14:12, 16:26; Ezekiel 33:10-11;
1 Corinthians 7:12-20
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If you've ever had the song "I'm Forever Blowing Bubbles" stuck in your head, it may be cause you've seen the 1931 movie, *The Public Enemy*. That's the movie that made James Cagney a star – the film in which he established the role of the gangster. Cagney plays Tom Powers, a poor man from a single-parent family in Chicago who starts out on a life of crime and becomes one of the most powerful and ruthless mob bosses. As you may expect, he comes to a very bad end.



James Cagney (center) as Tom Powers, Beryl Mercer (right) as Ma Powers, and Edward Woods (left) at Matt Doyle. [From The Public Enemy, © 1931 Warner Bros. Ent.](#)

Also in the movie is Beryl Mercer playing the role of Ma Powers. She is a loving, doting mother – one who can't seem to see anything wrong in her son.

We can't help but feel sympathy for Ma Powers as she watches her son make one bad choice after another, and nothing she does seems to make a difference. Yes, she apparently can't see anything wrong in her son, but we can surmise that inside her head she is grieving and wondering what could she do to get him to turn around, and holding out hope that he will turn around before it's too late.

Sadly, that doesn't happen, and the character of Tom Powers lives out Proverbs 16:26: "There is a way which seems right to a man, but it's end is the way of death."

Yes, Tom Powers starts out on a path that seems right – it's the path that allows him to make money and support his mother, but it is a path that brings death, not only to himself, but to many other people whose lives he steps on along the way.

That proverb echoes the words of Moses –

See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, and death and adversity; in that I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in His ways and to keep His commandments and His statutes and His judgments, that you may live and multiply, and that the LORD your God may bless you in the land where you are entering to possess it. But if your heart turns away and you will not obey, but are drawn away and worship other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall surely perish. You will not prolong *your* days in the land where you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess it. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the

curse. So choose life in order that you may live, you and your descendants, by loving the LORD your God, by obeying His voice, and by holding fast to Him; for this is your life and the length of your days, that you may live in the land which the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give them.

Deuteronomy 30:15-20 NASB1995)

Just a reminder: thanks to the atoning work of Messiah Yeshua, we who have entered into a relationship with the Lord God through Him have been grafted into this Covenant Nation of Israel, which means that these words Moses spoke thousands of years ago still have a direct application to us. We still have that choice to choose life or choose death. Ancient Israel made the wrong choice – day after day, year after year, century after century – which is why as God was bringing His judgment upon them, He spoke this through the prophet Ezekiel:

“Now as for you, son of man, say to the house of Israel, ‘Thus you have spoken, saying, “Surely our transgressions and our sins are upon us, and we are rotting away in them; how then can we survive?” Say to them, ‘As I live!’ declares the Lord GOD, ‘I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn back, turn back from your evil ways! Why then will you die, O house of Israel?’

Ezekiel 33:10-11 NASB1995

Even at that point, on the eve of judgment, God was still holding out that choice between life and death.

How do we choose life? It seems like an easy thing, but it’s not. Circumstances are murky. We live in a lost and broken world, and the choices are not always clear. We go back to Moses to find out how. We make that choice by loving the Lord our God, by obeying His voice, and by holding fast to Him. This is why He gave us a brain to learn the principles of life in His scriptures, and why He gave us a heart of compassion to walk out those principles in our daily lives. This is the way we discern the path of life.

What does that mean in day-to-day living? Let’s listen to the Apostle Paul’s advice on the matter. This is not a commandment from the Lord, as the apostle is clear to point out; this is his best advice based on what he knows of the scriptures, how he has walked it out himself, and how he has seen it walked out in others:

But to the rest I say, not the Lord, that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he must not divorce her. And a woman who has an unbelieving husband, and he consents to live with her, she must not send her husband away. For the unbelieving husband is sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified through her believing husband; for otherwise your children are unclean, but now they are holy. Yet if the unbelieving one leaves, let him leave; the brother or the sister is not under bondage in such cases, but God has called us to peace. For how do you know, O wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, O husband, whether you will save your wife?

1 Corinthians 7:12-16 NASB1995

In this case, Paul is talking about that murky situation of an “unequally yoked” couple, one who follows the Lord and one who does not. What is the right answer? What is the

answer of life? Quite often, the choices are not so much between right and wrong, but between two bad choices.

Think about Ma Powers. It doesn't say in the movie whether she went to church, but I can imagine if she were a church-going woman, what her friends there would be saying and thinking – wondering, perhaps, why she didn't just throw that bum of a son out, or maybe call the police and turn him in. But what's going on in her heart? This grieving mother has no power to stop her son from making bad choices himself, but at least the choices she makes can hold out hope, one day at a time, that eventually he will make the right choice and turn around.

This is another thing about the hard choices before us. Israel in the days of Ezekiel had gone so far down the path of wickedness that turning back to God was not an instant thing. It never is, really. In the case of Israel, and in the case of many of us and of many we know, it's a step-by-step turning – an incremental, little bit of progress at a time. That's why the choices are not so much between right and wrong, but between life and death.

What about the parent who is watching a child go down a path of addiction, or of crime, or of toxic relationships? Perhaps of gender confusion, or of sexual attractions that are contrary to the word of God?

What about that businessperson whose partners are engaged in shady dealings, and yet the business is the only thing that provides income for the household?

What about in our faith communities, where we see those we worship with in situations that are unhealthy and even contrary to the word of God?

What are our choices here? To cut off relationship, or to maintain relationship in hope that perhaps we can influence them to make a change, or at least hold off the inevitable, giving them more time to make that right choice on their own.

This is why God gave us a brain to think and reason this out, and this is why He gave us a heart to have compassion.

And one other thing: what about those in our congregations, in our churches, who are going through these things, or whose family members or associates are going through these things? How do we treat them? Do we shake our heads in judgment because the choices they have made do not line up with our understanding of what is in accordance with the scriptures, or do we embrace them and come around them and comfort them, and try to understand, and maybe try to bear their burdens with them? Even that is a choice between life and death.