

**Sermon / Kauwhau given at Service of Worship  
on Sunday 7 September 2025, led by Graham Redding,  
at Knox Church Ōtepoti Dunedin New Zealand**

**Text:** Psalm 1; Deuteronomy 30:15–20; Luke 14:25–33

There are few moments in Scripture as urgent and confronting as the words of Deuteronomy 30: “I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life...” It sounds like the simplest decision in the world. Life over death? Who wouldn’t choose life?

And yet, from Scripture and from our own experience, we know that the choice is rarely simple. The way of life can appear narrow, even costly. The way of death can seem comfortable, culturally endorsed, even attractive. That is the human predicament: choosing the road less travelled can be difficult, and we often don’t know what we’re choosing until much later.

Our three readings today each speak in different ways about the weight of human choice—and the God who chooses for us.

In Deuteronomy, Moses stands before the people of Israel as they are about to enter the Promised Land. He offers them a choice—not between belief and unbelief, but between two ways of being in the world. One path leads to life: loving God, walking in God’s ways, and keeping covenant. The other leads to destruction: turning away, worshipping false gods, becoming captive to the surrounding culture.

This is not just an ancient tribal warning. It is the human condition laid bare: we are always at a fork in the road. Psalm 1 captures this in poetry: the righteous person is like a tree planted by streams of water, fruitful and enduring. The wicked are like chaff—dry husks, scattered by the wind. Two ways. Two futures. The image is stark.

But let’s be honest. Most of the time, we don’t feel like we’re standing at a dramatic crossroads. Most of life is routine—shopping lists, traffic jams, emails, meetings. So how does this big, biblical language—life or death, blessing or curse—meet us in the ordinary?

This is where our culture's obsession with choice comes in. We are told every day that our power lies in what we choose: breakfast cereals, political parties, Netflix menus, lifestyle brands. We are constantly invited to curate a life through the marketplace. Choice is marketed as freedom.

And yet, what if that's only part of the story?

The idea that choice is purely personal—autonomous, harmless, self-contained—fails to reckon with what the Bible and other wisdom traditions have long known: our choices are never just about us. They shape the world we live in, the people we become, and the legacies we leave behind. On Father's Day, as with Mother's Day, we are reminded of this truth in a particular way: the choices we make as parents ripple through the lives of our children, grandchildren, and those who look to us for guidance. Whether as fathers, mothers, mentors, or friends, the patterns we set—of love, faith, and integrity—or the opposite—become part of another's story.

Take consumption. The “cheap” goods we enjoy—clothes, gadgets, food—are rarely cheap for the workers who make them or for the earth that bears the cost. What seems like a small, neutral decision—a t-shirt, a throwaway plastic bag, a quick online purchase—multiplied across millions, becomes an ecological and social catastrophe. These aren't necessarily malicious choices, but they are often mindless. And together they form a culture of waste and harm.

Or consider the way advertising reframes desire. A car is not just a means of transport; it's a statement of identity: you are what you drive. A pair of shoes becomes a “must-have.” Even wellness and leisure are turned into consumer categories. In this way, moral questions about justice and sustainability get flattened into consumer questions about taste and convenience. Our ability to see clearly and choose life is dulled.

And then there's addiction. Whether it's alcohol, gambling, sugar, pornography, online outrage, or the endless scroll of social media, many of us know how easily choice slips away. Addiction rarely begins with destructive intent. It starts small—a click, a scroll, a drink—to meet a perceived need or satisfy curiosity. But slowly we get hooked, and what we thought we controlled begins to control us. What once promised life begins to take life from us.

The Apostle Paul knew this struggle: “I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do” (Romans 7:19). That's not just theology—it's moral psychology. Our wills are conflicted. We have an inner conflict.

There are other times when the challenge of dealing with this conflict is not simply about resisting temptation or seeing through deception. Sometimes the hardest choices we face are not between something clearly good and something clearly harmful, but between two options where each seems to carry its own cost. Moral dilemmas, we call them.

A family member is gravely ill. Do you keep pursuing treatment that prolongs life but causes pain, or do you allow nature to take its course?

A business owner wants to pay the living wage, but doing so may mean the difference between keeping the business going or closing it down and leaving employees without any work at all.

A parent faces a decision of whether to stay in a demanding but stable job that provides financial security for their children, or to step away in order to be more present at home, knowing that financial uncertainty will ensue.

Some of you may recall the film *The Pursuit of Happyness* (2009), starring Will Smith, which told the true story of Chris Gardner, a father in San Francisco who, through no fault of his own, found himself homeless with his little boy. Each day he had to make impossible choices—whether to stand in line at the homeless shelter and risk missing a job interview, or to miss the shelter and risk sleeping on the streets with his son. In one of the most moving scenes, Chris and his boy sleep in a subway bathroom because there is nowhere else to go. Yet even in the middle of those dilemmas, Chris keeps choosing—choosing not to give up on his son, choosing to keep hope alive. His story reminds us that love sometimes means walking through impossible choices, carrying the weight of them, and trusting that God will meet us even there.

In such cases, the choice is not between obvious life and obvious death. It is between two goods that compete, or the lesser of two evils.

These moments remind us that Christian faith is not about having a neat answer to every problem, but about being formed into the kind of people who can wrestle faithfully with complexity. Psalm 1's image of the tree planted by streams of water is not about certainty in every decision, but about rootedness in God. A tree doesn't have a map of the future—it simply draws on the water that sustains it. In the same way, discipleship means being rooted in the way of Jesus, so that when dilemmas come, our instincts are shaped by love, justice, and humility.

And even then, we will still make mistakes. Which is why the gospel is not simply about making the perfect choice, but about trusting the One who has already chosen us and chosen for us. Christ meets us in our moral dilemmas, bearing the weight of our uncertainty, and reminding us that grace covers not only our wrong choices, but also our confusions.

We might imagine that being religious automatically aligns us with the path of life. But history tells us otherwise. Churches that proclaim a crucified peacemaker, have sometimes chosen empire, exclusion, or silence instead. They have justified slavery and colonisation, marginalised women and LGBTQI+ people, and ignored ecological collapse. Too often, churches have mistaken institutional survival for faithfulness. Not every choice made in Christ's name leads to life. Some deal in death.

That should caution us against over-confidence and self-deception. Religious institutions, like individual persons, get it wrong. Which is why the call to "choose life" is not a one-off decision, but an ongoing discernment: again and again, what path are we on? Are we being shaped into a tree planted by water—or into chaff scattered by the wind?

Into this comes Jesus' stark teaching in Luke 14. A large crowd is following him, perhaps imagining that discipleship is exciting, popular, even glamorous. And Jesus turns to them and says: Do you know what you're doing? If you want to follow me, you must carry a cross. You must reorder your loyalties, even family loyalties. You must be willing to give up everything. Count the cost.

"Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple," Jesus says. This is not hatred in a literal sense; it's Semitic hyperbole. Jesus is saying that discipleship is not a hobby or lifestyle accessory. It is not something you try on like a jacket. It is costly, deliberate.

The paradox is that often we don't realise we are choosing at all. Drift, passivity, indecision—these are choices too. Like a tree leaning slightly, over time they shape a destiny. That's why Moses' voice echoes across the centuries: "Choose life." Not once, not theoretically, but daily, in the ordinary.

And here's the deeper question: are we capable of choosing life on our own? Our culture conditions us to act quickly, consume constantly, move on. We are told that freedom is simply the ability to choose anything. But true freedom, as the biblical tradition insists, is the ability to choose well. To choose in ways that foster justice, compassion, truth, and love.

That means recovering a sense of interconnectedness. The human being is never just an individual. We are part of a people, a creation, a body. Our decisions ripple across time and space. When we choose compassion or sustainability, when we speak truth instead of sharing lies, when we stand with the vulnerable, we participate in what the Bible calls shalom—right relationship with God, neighbour, and earth. And on this Father's Day, we might also see shalom in the patient love of a parent, the quiet faithfulness of a father-figure, or the courage of those who nurture life even when it is costly. These ordinary acts of love are seeds of life.

The gospel is full of ordinary people—fishermen, widows, foreigners—who became agents of grace through small acts. That is good news in an age when many feel powerless. You don't have to fix the whole system. But you can plant something life-giving in your corner of the world. You can refuse to cooperate with what dehumanises. Even small choices can ripple outward.

Theologian Jürgen Moltmann once wrote that hope is a call to resistance. It enables us to act even when change is slow, even when the system feels too large to shift. Hope is not wishful thinking. It is the conviction that love is still worth choosing, again and again.

And yet, even with all this said, the gospel truth is this: our capacity to choose is compromised. We are entangled in forces bigger than us—what Scripture calls sin. Which is why the good news is not simply that we must choose, but that we have been chosen.

"You did not choose me," says Jesus in John's Gospel, "but I chose you." Long before we act and exercise moral agency, God's choice of us is secure. Jesus not only calls us to count the cost, he bears the cost himself. On the way to Jerusalem, he shoulders the cross we cannot carry, to free us from fear, and self-deception. His choice for life is given to us as grace. And grace sets us free to choose again, differently, better—not perfectly, but faithfully.

That is why the call to "choose life" is never crushing. It is grounded in mercy. When we fail, God's choice stands. When we are weary, Christ carries us. When we forget how to choose, the Spirit whispers: begin anew. And perhaps on this Father's Day, when memories may be tender and experiences of fatherhood mixed, even painful, we need that reminder most of all: that beyond all human failure or absence, we have a God who fathers us with steadfast love and claims us as beloved children.

Each generation, like Israel on the edge of the promised land, faces the call: choose life. Each disciple, like those crowds around Jesus, must count the cost. And each of us, like the tree by the stream, is invited to be replanted, renewed, rooted in grace.

**Prayer:**

God of life,  
you set before us blessing and curse, life and death.  
Root us again in your Word.  
Expose the false promises that scatter us like chaff.  
Heal us from the wounds of addiction and fear.  
Forgive us for choices that harm your earth and your people.  
And when we are too weary to choose well,  
remind us that Christ has already chosen us,  
and in his love we are made whole.  
Amen.

## **Knox Presbyterian Church, Ōtepoti Dunedin**

*Our vision is to see the reign of God, made known in Jesus, have a transformative effect on people's lives and on the world in which we live.*



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