

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Thanksgiving, November 24, 2022

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 575, 577: 1-2, 567, 566, 568.

Lessons: Psalm 136, 2 Corinthians 9: 6-15, Luke 17: 11-19.

Sermon Texts: Joshua 24: 14-15, Deuteronomy 28: 1-2, Deuteronomy 28:15.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

Have you ever responded to a threat? Have you ever done something because you were threatened with something bad if you didn't do it? Have you ever not done something because of threats? As a child, you often behave because of threats. As an adult your behavior may not so obviously be guided by threats. We could also ask "have you ever responded to a promise? Have you ever done something because you were promised something good if you did it?" Our lives may be guided by promises more than we think.

Deuteronomy chapter 28 details promises and threats that God gave to his chosen people in the Old Testament. Toward the end of the five divinely inspired books of Moses, we could think of this chapter as a sort of summary of the Law of God and as a sort of summary of the promises of God.

Joshua also placed a choice before God's people and invited their response after Moses spoke God's words in Deuteronomy 28. Joshua said "*if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living.*" Then he makes a statement indicating his intention: "*But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.*"

Surely you don't remember all the choices you made in your lifetime. Perhaps you are daily aware of some choices you made, and many others have been completely forgotten.

Sometimes we do make choices because of threats. Perhaps more often we make choices because of promises. We usually want to think of pleasant things, and would rather do pleasant things.

The choices and their consequences we are talking about today are pretty obvious. They are far different and tremendously more important than many of the choices in your life. Many times we agonize over choices and struggle with them and then later marvel at how insignificant some choices were. But the choices we are talking about today really turn out to be life or death choices. The choice facing us today is a choice between blessings and curses, between good things and evil results. Today let's talk about

BLESSINGS OR CURSES?

- 1. The choices: to follow God or to follow his enemies.**
- 2. Blessings and the joy of God's blessings.**
- 3. Curses and the horror of such curses**

Joshua was recognizing the choice that mankind's sinful human flesh would want to make. He was acknowledging that some people will not serve the Lord God. But he was also making a confession of his faith. He was saying that it was important for him to serve the Lord. He was not choosing to serve the false gods of the unbelieving Egyptians. He was not choosing to serve the idols of the Amorites, who were some of the people who had previously been living in Canaan, the land where the people whom God had chosen to first receive the Savior from all sin were now living. Joshua was choosing to serve the true God.

Joshua asks the people for whom God had done so much whom they are going to serve: the true God or some other gods, the gods of the world. It is easy to look around us and see some of the gods of the world. They

can be found along the residential streets in any city or village. They can be found in any town's business district or in any mall. They can be found in any parking lot. They can be found in any bank. Even worse, we can't see some of the gods of the world. They are locked in the heads and hearts of unbelievers.

All these gods raise their ugly heads in our lives, too. They butt into our lives every day. We must live in the world, for it is in the world that we are to be witnesses for Christ. We have the same sinful flesh that every person in the world has ever had – except your perfect Savior from sin, Jesus Christ. And we know, as Peter tells us, ***“your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour.”*** (1 Peter 5:8 KJV) ***“Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.”*** (NIV)

Today, right now, in this worship service, you are choosing to serve the Lord your God who has done marvelous things for you. But when you leave here, will you leave your God here? We pray not, and believe that is surely no one's intention today.

Joshua gave us the inspiration for our lives tomorrow and every day as well as for right now: ***“But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.”*** The true God was the one whom Joshua wanted to serve. He had heard the words of Moses from Deuteronomy chapter 28. We also know that Joshua, too, just like Moses, believed that God would send a Savior to redeem men from all their sins. Joshua's words are a great inspiration and hang on the walls of many Christian homes.

But we have another inspiration or motivation to choose blessings rather than curses. We have the list of blessings and curses that God gave to his chosen people near the end of Moses' life.

Throughout the years when God's people wandered in the wilderness on the way from Egypt to the promised land of Canaan, God ruled them directly, speaking through Moses. Moses was God's mouthpiece. God continued to rule them directly once they got to the promised land until they whined and complained that they wanted kings like the nations around them. As you read the Bible, throughout the Old Testament and all the way up through the death of Jesus Christ, the Savior-Messiah whom God sent, you will see that his chosen people chose not to serve him but rejected him again and again. Yet again and again, God's grace was extended, and he delayed his judgment on the nation of his chosen people until they finally rejected his salvation in Jesus Christ.

Aren't the first 14 verses of Deuteronomy 28 really a catalog of the blessings you have received from your God? Listen carefully, to see if it isn't a list of things you are thankful for today. Moses says, speaking by inspiration of God: ***“If you fully obey the LORD your God and carefully follow all his commands I give you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations on earth. {2} All these blessings will come upon you and accompany you if you obey the LORD your God: {3} You will be blessed in the city and blessed in the country. {4} The fruit of your womb will be blessed, and the crops of your land and the young of your livestock--the calves of your herds and the lambs of your flocks. {5} Your basket and your kneading trough will be blessed.”*** That talks about your “food basket” and the preparation of your food! ***“{6} You will be blessed when you come in and blessed when you go out. {7} The LORD will grant that the enemies who rise up against you will be defeated before you. They will come at you from one direction but flee from you in seven. {8} The LORD will send a blessing on your barns and on everything you put your hand to. The LORD your God will bless you in the land he is giving you. {9} The LORD will establish you as his holy people, as he promised you on oath, if you keep the commands of the LORD your God and walk in his ways. {10} Then all the peoples on earth will see that you are called by the name of the LORD, and they will fear you. {11} The LORD will grant you abundant prosperity--in the fruit of your womb, the young of your livestock and the crops of your ground--in the land he swore to your forefathers to give you. {12} The LORD will open the heavens, the storehouse of his bounty, to send rain on your land in season and to bless all the work of your hands. You will lend to many nations but will borrow from none. {13} The LORD will make you the head, not the tail. If you pay attention to the commands of the LORD your God that I give you this day and carefully follow them, you will always be at the top, never at the bottom. {14} Do not turn aside from any of the commands I give you today, to the right or to the left, following other gods and serving them.”*** (Deuteronomy 28:1-14 NIV)

Isn't God also talking about our lives, and all the good things that happen to us? But they aren't ours because we have always, every day, obeyed God and his Law. They are ours because of God's undeserved goodness and mercy and love – his grace. But this list of blessings really only hints at the greatest blessings of

all from our God: The Savior, Jesus Christ, his only-begotten Son whom he sent to obey the Law perfectly in our place, and then to be punished because we didn't obey the Law and can't obey the Law.

I think that there is no doubt in your life where your blessings have come from. Isn't that why you are here today? To join with those who believe, teach, and confess as you do in thanking the Lord your God for all he has done for you?

Thanksgiving is just one day on which God's children celebrate all that God has done for us. They do that every day. Thanksgiving is a special time to review our blessings. It isn't just a day for turkey and cranberries and stuffing. It isn't just a time to watch TV and football games or plan tomorrow's shopping excursion – the day that has become the biggest shopping day of the year in our materialistic nation! It is a time to reflect on all that the Lord God has done for you.

Despite the hype of this being a nationally proclaimed holiday, we must realize that we are to be thankful to our God. He is the one who provides the greatest joy we can know: the forgiveness of sins and the hope of heaven. God offers this to all mankind. And all who believe in his Son as their Savior from all their sins are the ones who actually receive this by faith. So God's blessings aren't only earthly blessings, but eternal, heavenly, spiritual blessings which we can enjoy even here on earth.

If God didn't bless you, what would you be able to do? What possessions would you have? Would you be successful workers, professional people and farmers, or would you be what society used to call "bums"?

Deuteronomy 28 lists 14 verses of blessings and then 54 verses of curses! God says "***All these curses will come upon you.***" Those curses include: "***you will sink lower and lower.***" God continues his threats: "***Because you did not serve the LORD your God joyfully and gladly in the time of prosperity, {48} therefore in hunger and thirst, in nakedness and dire poverty, you will serve the enemies the LORD sends against you. He will put an iron yoke on your neck until he has destroyed you.***" And there is more: "***If you do not carefully follow all the words of this law, which are written in this book, and do not revere this glorious and awesome name--the LORD your God-- {59} the LORD will send fearful plagues on you and your descendants, harsh and prolonged disasters, and severe and lingering illnesses. {60} He will bring upon you all the diseases of Egypt that you dreaded, and they will cling to you. {61} The LORD will also bring on you every kind of sickness and disaster not recorded in this Book of the Law, until you are destroyed. {62} You who were as numerous as the stars in the sky will be left but few in number, because you did not obey the LORD your God. {63} Just as it pleased the LORD to make you prosper and increase in number, so it will please him to ruin and destroy you. You will be uprooted from the land you are entering to possess. {64} Then the LORD will scatter you among all nations, from one end of the earth to the other. There you will worship other gods--gods of wood and stone, which neither you nor your fathers have known. {65} Among those nations you will find no repose, no resting place for the sole of your foot. There the LORD will give you an anxious mind, eyes weary with longing, and a despairing heart.***" Read for yourselves the entire chapter, and the horrible curses God threatens. (Pause here for a moment when reading this sermon aloud.)

Blessings or curses. Which will it be? What are you going to do? The fact that you are here today suggests that you have chosen to follow the Lord your God. Do not forget the words of Joshua: "***But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.***" This is a choice we must make again every day! This is a choice we must make every time when we are tempted to sin!

We can reject God even though he has chosen us. He has given us the forgiveness of sins and the hope of eternal life in heaven. He wants to give us every blessing. With his help we can continue to serve him every day of our lives. Lord, help us! Lord, preserve us unto eternal life! This we ask in Jesus' name, for Jesus' sake, because he has redeemed us! Amen.

Delivered on Thanksgiving, 2021, and revised from a Ministry by Mail Sermon for November 25, 2001.