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The First Law of Life

Why our paths are crossing at this time I am not sure, but I imagine it is because you are looking for something more in life. I'm glad you're here. I look forward to talking with you about issues and questions that are vital to all of us.

In this series, we focus on the issue of life or death. Our Creator has given us a choice between these two powerful forces, but in my experience many people do not know how to distinguish between them when making their choices.

Life or Death, an Ancient Choice

When you look at our Sacred Text, you can see this matter of life and death is old; it runs from the beginning of Genesis to the very end of Revelation.

Key Scriptures

- And the Lord God planted *a garden* toward the east, in Eden; and there He placed the man whom He had formed. And out of the ground the Lord God caused to grow every tree that is pleasing to the sight and good for food; *the tree of life* also in the midst of the garden, and *the tree of the knowledge of good and evil*. Now a river flowed out of Eden to water the garden (Gen 2:7-10).
- The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. And the Lord God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from *the tree of the knowledge of good and evil*, for when you eat from it you will certainly die" (Gen 2:15-17).
- 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 (Deut 30:19-20).
- The thief comes only to steal, and *kill*, and destroy; I came that they might have *life*, and might have it abundantly (John 10:10).
- And He who sits on the throne said, "Behold I am making all things new ... And He said to me, "It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. I will give to the one who thirsts from the *spring of the water of life* without cost (Rev 21:5-6).
- He showed me a *river of the water of life*, clear as crystal, coming from the *throne of God* and of *the Lamb* ... and on either side of the river was the *tree of life* (Rev 22:1-2).
- Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the *tree of life* (Rev 22:14).

In our study on life and death, we will consider the meaning of truths in our key scriptures. Be sure you notice the following words or phrases whenever they are mentioned because they carry symbolic truths which, when you understand them, will help you experience much more satisfaction in your life.

Here are the symbolic images from our seven key scriptures: 1) the garden; 2) the trees; 3) the tree of life; 4) the tree of the knowledge of good and evil; 5) the river; 6) life; 7) death; 8) the throne of God; 9) the river or spring of the water of life; 10) the Lamb.

Did you notice that our Creator put Himself on record as giving His man, Adam, a choice? What a tremendous and terrible choice it was: one direction would lead to life, the other to death. But in spite of the warning, Adam chose wrongly! Was it because he failed to grasp the seriousness of what his Creator God had said? Perhaps we will never know.

The power of choice

Before we go further, I want you to understand right up front that this choice has been given to every human being. You have been given the same choice as Adam – a choice between these two conflicting and powerful forces, *life* or *death*.

This is why it is so vital that you can recognize the differences between them in every area of your life, and the characteristics and qualities of each one. Then you can choose more of that which is beautiful, valuable, life-giving, and fulfilling, rather than that which is worthless, harmful, death-producing, and empty.

❖ To choose means to select something; to decide on one thing over another.

The power of choice is one of the biggest and most compelling realizations you can have! God has never negated the power of choice that He gave to you and me, although there are others who will.

↳ ***What does this power of choice mean to you? How will it change your life?***

The power of choice means that your life path is not fixed! You can change it by the way you think, by what you say, by the choices you make, and I might add, by listening to and obeying the voice of the One who created you.

Once when we were in Egypt, our Egyptian bus driver told us, “What will be, will be!” In other words, there is nothing we can do about anything. This seems to be the attitude of many people today.

To comfort themselves, often people of faith will say, “God has it.” But does this attitude leave out the influence and power of each one of us? Through our words, our actions, and our prayers?

Over one hundred years ago, William James wrote: “the greatest discovery of my generation is that human beings can alter their lives by altering their attitudes of mind.”¹

Basic principle of life

We must learn that the right to choose for ourselves is a fundamental principle of life. In fact, choice is a *sine qua non* of life – an essential condition, a thing that is absolutely necessary to what it means to be a human being.

The late Swiss physician Paul Tournier² said it like this: “The first law of life is the right of the individual to choose for one’s self, i.e., self-determination – to be free is to choose for one’s self. To be fully alive, to live, is to choose every second of every day.”

To live is to choose – P. Tournier

We have been given the responsibility by our Creator to control our own affairs. Dr. Rollo May³ explained that this is what separates us from animals. Animals are bound by a rigid stimulus/response system, but we are able to rise above that.

Your freedom to make a creative decision when faced with multiple conflicting possibilities is a basic element of what it means for you to be a human being.

✦ *Do you know that your mind can handle at one time a variety of different impulses and then choose to follow the best one?*

Created with the freedom of choice

The Author of Life created us with the freedom of choice, the responsibility to choose for ourselves. In the Garden experience, Adam knew this: he was free to choose any of the trees in the garden to eat from – except one.

He was even warned about the danger of eating from that one tree and what would happen if he did. It would cause the death of his spirit, i.e., the cutting off of communication between his spirit and God.

- From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you shall surely die (Gen 2:16-17).

✦ *What kind of death did God mean?*

¹ William James (1842–1910): An American philosopher, historian, and psychologist was an influential writer on religion, physical research, and self-help, like his book, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.

² Paul Tournier (1898–1986): A Swiss physician and author of *The Meaning of Persons* and *The Adventure of Living*, he acquired a worldwide audience for his work in pastoral counseling. His ideas had a significant impact on the spiritual and psychosocial aspects of patient care. He has been called the twentieth century's most famous Christian physician.

³ Rollo May (1909–1994): the father of existential psychology authored the influential book *Love and Will* (1969).

The gift of freedom

In light of what happened in the Garden, I can understand why Erich Fromm⁴ called freedom a terrible gift. Perhaps this explains why so many of us run away from this freedom of choice.

There is no gift human beings will run faster from than the terrible gift of freedom – Erich Fromm

↳ *Do you have a fear of freedom?*

The more I thought about freedom, I realized I needed a better understanding of what this word really means, because it seemed that life was full of rules, all kinds of them. So I went on a search to learn more.

What is freedom?

In the New Testament, I found that the Greek word *eleutheros* translated as freedom simply means freedom. However, I couldn't relate to it. It lacked depth of meaning for me.

So I turned to *Webster's Unabridged Dictionary* and discovered a fuller understanding of what is meant by "freedom."

↳ *Read each of the following descriptions of freedom, by saying "I am ..." Note what comes to your mind or emotions as you read each one. Was one more challenging than others?*

1. Not under the control of some other person or some other power.
2. Able to move in any direction – not held as in chains.
3. Not confined to usual rules or patterns.
4. Not limited by convention or tradition.
5. Not held or confined by prejudice or bias.
6. Able to choose for myself, to determine my action freely; able to be spontaneous.
7. Able to act or think without compulsion.
8. Exempt from impositions and duties; acquitted.
9. Released from obligation, duty.

Do we want this freedom?

Although freedom is the fundamental condition for our growth, the sad reality is that many of us do not want to be saddled with it. Why is this? Is it because we are afraid of too much responsibility or of making the wrong choices? Too lazy? A coward?

⁴ Erich Fromm (1900–1980) was a social psychologist who fled the Nazi regime as a German Jew and settled in the US; he wrote numerous books, including *The Art of Loving*, *Escape from Freedom*, and *The Heart of Man: Its Genius for Good and Evil*.

For most of us, it seems easier to blame someone else for what is going wrong in our life – like Adam blamed Eve – rather than take the responsibility for our own life. We want someone else to be responsible for our life.

Often people have trouble deciding things on a very simple level, like what do I want to order from a menu. Others have trouble deciding if they want to marry someone, perhaps because of fear. Some people don't have a clue what they want in life or what they want to do with their life.

Psychiatrist Scott Peck⁵ said, "One of the greatest problems of human existence is in distinguishing what we are and what we are not responsible for in this life.

"The problem of distinguishing what we are and what we are not responsible for in this life is difficult, but we must assume responsibility for what is properly ours, not blaming others or avoiding the pain of resolving our problems."

Psychological disorders are generally disorders of responsibility. Neurotics assume too much responsibility; those with character disorders, not enough. – Peck

Is it your choice?

Psychologist Fromm's⁶ ideas on freedom are thought-provoking. He said, "Most people are convinced that as long as they are not overtly forced to do something by an outside power, their decisions are theirs, and that if they want something, it is they who want it. But this is one of the great illusions we have about ourselves.

"A great number of our decisions are not really our own but are suggested to us from the outside; we have succeeded in persuading ourselves that it is we who have made the decision, whereas we have actually conformed with expectations of others, driven by the fear of isolation and by more direct threats to our life, freedom, and comfort."

↳ *Practice being aware of when you are making a choice. Ask yourself, is it really my choice? Why am I making this choice?*

A double-minded man is unstable in all of his ways

According to Psychologist David Seabury,⁷ prolonged indecision is a poison: "Indecision always arises from some inner conflict which one has not had the courage to resolve, or even to become aware of. Such people do not even know what their tastes, their beliefs, and their aim in life are. As soon as they make a decision, they begin wondering if they've made a mistake. If we run away from the first choices we are faced with, we sink into a twilight in which we no longer see clearly the decision that has to be made."

⁵ Dr. M. Scott Peck (1936–2005) was an American psychiatrist who was catapulted to notoriety through the runaway sales of *The Road Less Traveled* (1978). His #1 best-seller was joined by *People of the Lie* (1983). He was a nationally recognized authority on the relationship between religion and science, and the science of psychology in particular.

⁶ Erich Fromm (1900–1980), *Escape from Freedom*.

⁷ David Seabury (1850–1960) was an American psychologist and lecturer who published numerous books, including his self-help guide, *The Art of Selfishness* (1937).

Our Sacred Text tells us the same thing. It says it like this: “A double minded man is unstable in all his ways” (James 1:8).

When we refuse to choose, we are rejecting life and ourselves, and we spend our life anticipating pain, fear, and anger. The negation of life is to act against our better judgment through weakness, because we do not dare to take responsibility for our decisions. We are content that others should make the choice for us.

It is much easier to be in the position of a victim than in that of a person conscious of his or her choices and responsibilities, and of the gifts he or she is endowed with. – Tournier⁸

Living in a cage?

Some people tell me they are so terrified of freedom that they prefer to live their life in cages they built for themselves; they are afraid to come out, afraid of life itself. Also, other people cannot confine us unless we allow them to. Freedom is our friend.

Helps for making choices and decisions

- ◆ Choose one direction, then project yourself into the future and note how you feel as a result of choosing that way. Then reverse the decision, and note how you feel if you make it the other way. Do you feel peace? Is there a relaxation in your body and heart, or do you feel unrest, strain, disappointment?
- ◆ Ask yourself, which way do you have the most confidence for?
- ◆ Use a journal technique: Start with a question for your Creator, any real question. Write it down. Then write whatever comes to your mind as fast as you can for the next 15 minutes. Then look at it to see what keeps recurring, etc.

God sent His Son to give us freedom

Our Sacred Text tells us that our Creator sent His Son so we can become free.

- The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed [downtrodden] (Luke 4:18).
- If the Son shall make you free, you shall be free indeed (John 8:36).

↪ ***Using a scale of 0 to 10 (0, not free at all; 10, totally free), how free do you think you are?***

⁸ Dr. Paul Tournier, *The Meaning of Persons*

My Story

In this study on life and death, I also share my stories and the insights I've received over many decades. I know you will be encouraged by my lived experiences and the discoveries I made throughout my journey in life.

One of the ways we learn is from role models, the testimony of others; perhaps we even learn more this way than from didactic information.

My growing up years

I was born into a third-generation fishing family on the eve of World War II—when horrible atrocities were about to be committed in our “civilized” society. I colored my world dark and gray.

- ❖ Interestingly, Leanne Payne⁹ said, “Memories of growing up in (seemingly) unloving and deadly dull circumstances are often described as long, gray blurs. The memory is tonal in nature, an aura of sadness is there, but no memory of particularly traumatic events haunts the deep mind.”

My father's family, descendants of Dutch and German immigrants, were church-going Methodists. The men were hard-working and hard-drinking fishermen. The love for the sea lingered in their blood, along with a desire for alcohol.

Growing up, I often listened to the dream of my father: “I wanted to be a doctor,” he said, as he pulled the sliver out of the finger of one of the little kids. I watched in fascination as he wielded his pen knife as if it was a fine surgical tool. It was then that I decided I would become a nurse when I grew up.

- ❖ Dr. Carl Jung¹⁰ explains we often choose career paths because we are trying to live out the unlived lives of our parents. *Was this why I became a nurse—even though I never enjoyed it?* Later in life, I went to grad school so I could become a therapist, only to discover my real love is writing and teaching.

My mother's family were of English, Irish, and French descent. Divorce, alcohol, and suicide marked her family heritage. All the women in the family had been divorced, except for my mother. She had a different spirit. As a young woman, she read the Bible through—even though her family had not been church-goers.

Growing up, I didn't know if our family was much different from other families—it was the only family I knew. Fear, envy, jealousy, superstition, and prejudice were the norm.

Adopting a role to play

Being the first-born of an alcoholic father, I settled into the role of being the family hero.

⁹ Leanne Payne (1932–2015) was the founder of Pastoral Care Ministries and a pioneer in healing prayer. She authored many books, including *The Broken Image*, p. 20.

¹⁰ Dr. Carl Jung (1875–1961) was a Swiss psychiatrist and psychoanalyst who founded analytical psychology and whose research helped prove the existence of the unconscious and the value of dreams.

As the family hero, I became a super-achiever in studies, as well as super-responsible in church activities. As a people-pleaser, I got acceptance, attention, and approval by doing what the adults expected – by trying to be perfect.

- ❖ In a dysfunctional system, the child adopts a role to play for survival. This allows a dysfunctional system to continue, while denying it and the problems it causes—at great cost to personal freedom and emotional well-being of the child.

My spiritual foundation

In the midst of my dull, gray existence, a seed of hope was planted. When I was an infant, my mother hung a picture of Jesus over my crib – she said my first word was “Jesus.”

When I got older, my mother sent me to a nearby Sunday School where I heard Bible stories about people who knew and had experienced our Creator God. On flannel graph boards, ancient people like Joseph, Abraham, Joshua, Mary, and Baby Jesus came alive again for a small girl with a hurting heart. There I found an oasis of hope and joy.

At times, I’d lie awake in my bed at night trying to imagine what it would be like to be with this God forever. I imagined being outside of time and space, but it terrified me. I had a deep desire to know Him, yet at the same time I was afraid.

“Someday I want to know God”

I kept saying to myself, “Someday ... someday I want to find this God. Someday I want to know Him ... but not until I get married ... not until I have children.” My fear was that, if I got to know Him, I wouldn't have any fun. I couldn't get married or have children. I think I was afraid of what it might cost me. And I wanted to do my own thing.

When I dated a boy who was “not good,” my mother prayed for me. Shortly thereafter I met my future husband; he was from a Christian home. Two years later, in the middle of my nurses training, we married. We were just 19, but very determined.

My young adult years

Working hard, I graduated, and we moved to another city where my husband studied engineering. During the next three years, I juggled my responsibilities as a young wife and homemaker and birthed two sons while working as a nurse in the hospital. I gave my energy to establishing myself as a good wife, mother, and nurse, and obeying the rules of the church.

To all appearances, I was a good woman. Yet with all of my church activities, I had no assurance of God’s presence in my life or peace in my heart. I still kept saying, “Someday I am going to get to know this God; someday ...”

I also desired to be something more than I was. I felt very small inside, and I wanted to become bigger. My image of myself was that of an empty box – I had nothing inside of me that was valuable.

Filled with fear

At times, my needs, fears, and coping mechanisms from childhood created havoc and chaos within me and in my marriage. I suffered with chronic bouts of loneliness and boredom. Sometimes I escaped into sleep, books, fantasy, or soap operas.

I felt rejected and unloved, isolated and helpless in a world that seemed potentially hostile. A feeling of emptiness permeated me deep on the inside.

Sometimes my emotions became all stirred up with jealousy, resentment, and revenge. I easily lost my sense of self. I often had the feeling of my mother's identity overwhelming me.

For instance, I would be ironing, and suddenly a memory of my mother ironing filled my mind, and I would feel as if I was my mother ironing. My identity was blurred with hers. Years later, I was troubled by a familiar spirit and freed from it – but in our scientific age, who believed in such things?

Not knowing who I was, I often tried to attach to people who I thought were important, or I fixated on those who I thought were beautiful and gifted. I clung to them like a codependent person.

- ❖ Co-dependency requires another individual for survival, i.e., parasitism. No freedom involved in relationship. It exists out of necessity, not out of love.—Dr. M. Scott Peck¹¹

I also suffered from a feeling of “insecurity and vague apprehensiveness.” Karen Horney¹² calls this a *basic anxiety*. I was always tense and on guard; my speech was pressured. My insides felt as if a taunt string was strung between my arms and legs with a tight knot in the middle of my stomach. For years I did not know this was not normal.

There were times I felt like I didn't want to live. And I was filled with all kinds of fears: I was afraid of losing my husband to another woman, afraid of sickness and disease, afraid of storms, afraid of death, afraid of being rejected by people, afraid of expressing myself, and most of all I was afraid of losing a child.

As the years went by, my longing to know a living God increased, but now I had a new reason to keep from drawing near: I was afraid if I did, He might do something bad to one of my children. As a student nurse, I'd watched heartbroken parents as their children died. I was convinced that I could never live through something like this. This fear continued to obsess me.

Prison of fear and anxiety

More years went by; soon I was thirty. I had my husband, and I had my children – our third son was born. I wasn't any closer to knowing if there really was a living God than I'd been as a child.

¹¹ Dr. M. Scott Peck, *The Road Less Traveled* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1978).

¹² German psychotherapist Karen Horney (1885-1952) practiced in the United States and authored a great book called, *Neurosis and Human Growth* (1950).

Still afraid to try and find Him, because of what might happen if I did, I lived in a state of anxiety. I was afraid one of my children would get sick and die. These fears continued to keep me from searching for our Creator God.

Locked into this state year after year, I lived in a prison of fear—fear of living and fear of dying. I had no sense of living life fully. Working hard to follow all of the rules had not brought me any peace or satisfaction in life.

For all my church-going, I had not been changed or healed on the inside. I wonder how many more years would have gone by like this, if my world hadn't fallen apart.

Reflection Points

- ◆ In this chapter, what stood out to you?
- ◆ What does it mean to be a human being?
- ◆ What does this Key Scripture say God offers you? *“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”* (Deut 30:19-20).

Your Response

- ⇒ What do you think are the two key words in this chapter?
- ⇒ Look back over your life, and in your journal list your most important choices—the good and the bad. Who do you blame for your bad choices?
- ⇒ Do you have any bad choices you need to make peace with? Try to spontaneously journal about that choice and see what emerges.
- ⇒ After making a choice, practice saying, “I made that choice!” Can you sense the power you feel when you say it?
- ⇒ If you feel like you are living in a cage, in your journal write down your reasons for needing to stay in it.
- ⇒ I saw myself as an empty box. Draw a picture to symbolize how you see yourself.
- ❖ I suggest you get a journal so you can record your experiences, insights, and laws of life you discover while doing this study on life or death. And it will give you a safe place to explore your questions, desires, and observations. There is real power in expressing yourself with a pen and writing with your own hand.