

# “CHOOSING LIFE OVER DEATH”

## PROVERBS 8

APRIL 24, 2011, EASTER SUNDAY, 11:00 AM – DR. JACK GRAHAM

[applause] Oh, thank you so much for that. Choir, you’ve been here all morning. Some of you are going to go home, get Easter lunch ready. I understand that. But ah... to all our musicians, singers, instrumentalists, Todd and all of your team, thank you for a great worship today. And for all of you here, ah... along in[with] the overflow in the chapel and various rooms around the building, we are the people of the resurrection! And because He lives, we live also! And we are celebrating our life in Christ.

We’ve been in a series of messages called CHOICES, taken from the book of Proverbs. And we’ve been talking about the important choices that we make in life; making wise choices, good choices, choices that honor God, choice... choices that strengthen our own lives and build our character. Choices. But today we come to the most important choice of all. In fact it is a decision that determines our destiny. It is a dec... a decision not just for a day, but for a lifetime and eternity. Take your Bibles and turn with me to Proverbs chapter 8.

The most urgent and critical choice you will make is the choice that is described here. It concerns your personal relationship with God and your eternal salvation. It is the same decision that was made when Pilate... Pontius Pilate stood before the people that day, the day Christ was crucified and asked, “What will you do with Jesus who is called the Christ?” That is the critical question. It is the Christ question. Will you choose life or will you choose death? “For whoever finds Me finds life and obtains favor from the Lord. But he who fails to find me injures himself. All who hate Me love death.”

Jesus put it this way in John, chapter 5 [24]... an important verse in God’s Word from the lips of our Lord: *“Truly, truly I say to you, whoever hears My word and believes Him who sent Me has... (right now and forever)... has... (not hope so, think so, maybe so)... has eternal life! He does not come into judgment but has passed from death to life.”* This is the choice we make today.

Something big is happening in our city. Something incredible, something wonderful. The date is set. It’s all about to happen. The opening of the first In-N-Out Burger in our city [laughter, applause] is on the way! May the eleventh! Eleven will open across this region. Now how many of you are from California know all about In-N-Out Burger? Say Amen! Alright! It’s good! Let me tell you one of the reasons it’s so good besides being a good burger. It’s a simple menu.

You ever been to one of these restaurants, you can barely see and the menu’s so long you can’t read it. And ah... it’s just complicated. You can’t make a decision? In-N-Out is very simple... burgers! Now, you can get a single, you can get a double, you can get a triple. I’ve even seen Marc Rylander eat a quadruple! [laughter] That’s four pieces of meat. And you can get it with cheese or without cheese. That’s a decision. There’s a secret menu that some of the insiders of In-N-Out know about. Animal style and the like. But it’s burgers and fries, hand-cut before your very eyes. And then sodas and shakes. That’s it. Bur... burgers, fries and shakes. It’s just a simple decision... I like simple decisions... simple choices. And the thing about In-N-Out burger when their sign goes up and the signs, I think, are already up, but it’s a bolt of lightning.

By the way the family that began In-N-Out Burger in California, is a strong, believing family and on the bottom of their cup... John 3:16 is written there. And it says simply on the sign... it’s a simple sign. It’s a bolt in the

middle... a yellow bolt of lightning, and In-N-Out. That's it! I want you to think about something every time you see that sign from now on. That “Bolt In-N-Out”...

That's what happened at Easter. Jesus went in and He went out of the grave! He is alive forevermore! [laughter and applause] It's just in and out! That's the simple message, the profound and powerful message of the resurrection. And we all have a decision: Do we believe or do we not believe? Do we say yes to what Christ has done for us or neglect it or even say no to Christ? It is our choice.

It's all about life. Life is a beautiful and wonderful choice. Ah... When you read the book of Proverbs, forty-eight times the word *life* appears. Ah... for example ah... on some occasions the word *life* is in regard to physical life... our physical existence... existence. Like Proverbs 3, verse 27: *“The fear of the Lord prolongs life, but the years of the wicked will be short.”*

Now if you've been with us a while, you know that the Proverbs... they aren't ironclad promises, but rather they are proverbs... they are simple short sentences with a sermon, a message in each one. And what you read in Proverbs is what is typically true, what trends to be true, what is... what is... what is most always the wise way. And, for example, I say almost always because we... we know people who have died young; did not live out a full years as we would count a full lifetime. They're martyrs and children and... and...

But it is typically true that those who practice their faith live longer than those who don't. And there are studies to prove that. So you will live longer and you will live stronger in Christ. He will not only add life to your years, life with a capital “L”, but years to your life. That is... that is... that is true in God's Word.

Ah... The word *life* also refers to abundance in the book of Proverbs. A life that is full, a life that is flowing over. For example, Proverbs 12:28: *“In the path of the righteous...”* (What is that path? Christ is our righteousness. We've chosen righteousness in Christ) But it is the path of right living! There's life. *“... and it's pathway... and in it's pathway there is no death.”* [7:21]

Again, in Proverbs 15:24: *“The path of life leads upward; it a life in Christ that is onward and upward... (always forward) “that he may turn away from Sheol (the place of death, the place of the grave, the place of judgment, Hades and hell...) ...that he may turn away from Sheol beneath.”* It is a choice that we make. I mean, do we choose life in Christ or do we choose death without Christ? Do we choose an abundant and fulfilling life and a forever life in him, or do we choose a life lived for self?

Now we make all kinds of decisions in life that we can control. But interestingly enough most of the decisions, the important decisions in life we don't control. You may have heard that our family is expecting a baby. Josh, our youngest son, and his wife Kaytie are expecting a baby... baby in October. And at our Easter gathering yesterday with our family we played a game and that is a game about the baby to come. For example, what's the baby's name going to be? We don't know, but we put up boy names and girl names. What's the gender going to be? Boy or girl? What color of eyes? What color of hair? Hair or no hair? [laughter] Ah... we... we... you know, middle name? When the baby is going to be born? We have a general idea. The baby's going to be born the middle of October but what date, and not just what date, but we had to guess the hour and the minute the baby is going ah... to be born. All these questions and decisions, and guess what? We control hardly any of this!

You didn't control the day you were going to be born. The very fact that you are born... that was God's decision! You don't control the day that you die! You... you may try to control it, but that's in the hand of God. You don't... you didn't control when you were born, what era, what decade. You didn't control your gender. You didn't control your race, the color of your eyes, the color of your hair! All of that is out of our control! The day you're born, the day you die.

The same man that gave us Proverbs, Solomon, said [Ecclesiastes 3:2], “*There’s a time to be born and there’s a time to die!*” [Hebrews 9:27] “*It is appointed unto man once to die, and then the judgment.*” So we have so very little control, do we not, regarding these important issues.

But amazingly God has given us an awesome choice... whether to choose Him or not to choose Him, whether to choose our way or to choose His way, to choose life or to choose death! We’re not automatons or robots. We’re not puppets on a string. We are beings created in the image of God who have been given this capacity to respond to Him in love! And so this is the choice that we make, not by accident or chance. You’re not here b... by accident or circumstance, but rather by the divine providence of God who have brought you here to this moment and given you the power to choose.

If you’ve lived long enough you’ve started to ask some important questions about life, especially if you’ve recently encountered death or a mortality in your own life or in your family. You start asking those life and death questions: Why am I here? What is the purpose of life? What gets me up... What does get you up everyday? Surely more than the alarm clock. What is your passion, your purpose in your life?

It is... it is His purpose that becomes our passion because we now have a life in Him. So many are just enduring life rather than enjoying life... experiencing life. The Bible talks about people who are walking around like dead people... dead men and women walking. While they have physical life, there is no spiritual life. It’s possible that you have physical life but you don’t have spiritual life today. You’re cut off from the life of God. What is life? Life is what you are alive to... life is what you’re alive to.

I’m a big baseball fan. Ah... saw a tee shirt one time, [it] said Baseball is life. Now I love baseball but baseball is not life. Ah... your work is not your life unless that’s the only thing you’re alive to. Your wor... what you are alive to... that is your life! Some of us are selling ourselves cheaply. We’re living for lesser things; things that do not last. So we end up just going through the motion. It’s just blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah... and then the end comes. What is your purpose? What is God’s purpose for your life? You have life.

On the other hand, death! Now death is not a subject we like to talk about. If you want to be by yourself at a party, just start talking about death and watch the room clear. [laughter] Maybe you’re even thinking, “You know, don’t talk to me, Pastor, today about death. I don’t want to hear about that. Talk to me about bunnies and baskets, and bonnets... bonnets and beautiful things.” [laughter] Well we’re here for more than that, aren’t we? We’re not here just to be beautiful people on Easter. We want to know what matters most. And here’s what most of us think about death. Death is something that happens to somebody else.

I can remember when my father was murdered in 1970. I remember the surreal feeling of all that. If you’ve ever been, you know, around something like this... victim of violent crime or even just death itself among a family member probably one of your emotions is, this ... this does not seem real. Is this real? It was surreal! This is what happens to somebody else! This is for another time! This is to another place... this is... this is what you watch on the news at night. This is... This is what you read about in the newspaper! This can’t be happening to us!

But death is no respecter of persons... heart disease and cancer, auto accident. You think, well, that happens to somebody else. Maybe yes, maybe no. Especially if you’re young, you think you’re pretty much indestructible right now. Death will happen fifty-sixty years from now. You’ll be an old person and you know, you’ll pull the covers over your head and die.

But death typically doesn’t happen like that, does it? Death is an intruder, an invader, a destroyer. The Bible calls death the king of terrors. Death does happen, and it happens when you least expect it. That rich fool in the Bible

never expected the knock at the door [tap] when death came calling and said [Luke 12:20], *“You fool. This day your soul is required of you.”*

Hey, the last time I checked the death rate is still 100 percent! [laughter] One out of one persons die. We’re all just a heartbeat... a hairbreadth from heaven or hell. Every day in the world 250,000 people step into eternity. And God made us with immortal souls, eternal souls. When He breathed into us the breath of life we became living souls. The life of God is poured into us and we could no longer cease to exist anymore than God Himself can cease to exist. Your soul... your immortal, eternal soul will go on endless, timeless, measureless, dateless throughout all eternity, either in heaven or in hell. And this is why we must prepare for death.

I’m not talking about writing your will, that’s a good thing; or getting your preparations done... ah... down at the funeral home. I’m talking about preparing for death by preparing for eternity. The Bible says, “Prepare to meet your God!” When you die, you don’t die like an animal. You don’t just cease to exist. You... You do not die and cover your head in the grave. When you die, you will stand before God. Therefore, the psalmist said [Psalm 90:12], *“Teach us to number our days and recognize how few they are.”* Our lives, even if they are lived long upon the earth are just an infinitesimal blip on the screen of eternity! So help us to spend them as we should. The psalmist also said, “You have made my life no longer than width of my hand.” My entire lifetime is just a moment to you! At best each of us is but a breath.

James, the half brother of our Lord, says [James 4:14] our life is like a vapor. And in when you get up on a cool, frosty morning and you breathe out, and you see your breath, the frost on your breath, and then it... pffft... disappears! Life is like that. So even though death is not something that we like to talk about, we need to be reminded that death is the disease that kills all of us, and not just physically, but spiritually.

The Apostle Paul put it this way: “Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sin.” Conscientious of the choice to sin and we’ve all chosen to sin. We are sinners by nature, we are sinners by choice. We’ve all broken the commandments of God. [Romans 3:10] *“There’s none righteous, no not one.”* [Romans 6:23] *“The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.”*

Because Jesus took our death upon the cross, He died in a finite moment an infinite death... an eternal death on the cross for our sins! Sin causes death. Christ took our sins, He took our death and our shame, our suffering! He died on the cross, He was carried to a grave and on the third day He broke the power of sin and death and hell and came back again, alive forevermore!

Ball game! That’s it! This is our message! Without this message there is no faith in Christ, there is no Christianity without this message! We are nothing! There is no purpose at all if this message is not true! But because we believe it is true... that it is irrefutably true, it is... it is... it is absolutely true that Christ came out of the grave! You don’t have to close your eyes and believe things that you just hope are true! There is enough evidence and rationale to believe that Christ came out of that grave! He lives! John Stott, the great British preacher, said, “We live and die; Christ died and lived!” And then He said, “Because I live, you will live also.” Life and death! Christ defeated death; you can choose life. Proverbs 12:28: *“In the path of righteousness is life and in its pathway there is no death.”* That’s a great word, isn’t it?

And what we do with this choice of life and death, as I’ve said earlier, is a decision that determines our destiny. If you are a Christ-follower there is no reason for you to be afraid of death. None at all. You are a... a living soul. You’re not a body that has a soul; you’re a soul that has a body. This body... this earthly tabernacle, this earthly tent... this house... this ol’ house will be torn down, but [2 Corinthians 5:8] *“to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord.”* And one day we will be given immortal, eternal bodies, the ultimate makeover.

Remember this, you are not in the land of the dying on your way to the land of the living. You are in the land... rather, let me put it the other way... You are not in the land of the living on your way to the land of the dying; you are in the land of the dying on your way to the land of the living... because of Christ. Paul put it this way, facing the end of his own journey in a Roman dungeon: [Philippians 1:21] *“For to me to live is Christ; to die is gain.”* To live, Christ! To die is gain. He went on to say, [Philippians 1:23] *“It is far better... far better to depart and to be with Christ.”*

Now, even though we know it's far better, that doesn't mean we don't enjoy life; doesn't mean we don't fasten our seatbelts and not careful to look both ways crossing the street. We love life. Every good and perfect gift comes from God. We love a beautiful sunset. In fact, I could make the case that Christians live life to the fullest more than others. We... we see a sunset and we recognize the Creator beyond that beautiful sunset or ... or sunrise. We can enjoy a loving, faithful marriage and a career that is fulfilling and with a purpose in life. We... we can enjoy a sumptuous In-N-Out Burger and love it all the way [chuckle]! I mean, we... we... we can love entertainment and a ballgame and all the rest! We love life!

But we know there's something better coming. To depart and be with Christ which is far, far better. Your best life's not now; it's then, when you are with Him. That's why we're not afraid of death. We want to live, and yet we know “to live is Christ, to die is gain.” You can't beat a deal like that! *“To live is Christ and to die is gain.”* C.S. Lewis said, “We are made for another world.”

There's an old preacher by the name of Vance Havener, South Carolina country preacher... he had a lot of great quotes and quips. Kind of like Yogi-isms, great catcher of the Yankees. But here's one of Havener's quips: “It is the hope of dying that has kept me alive this long.” [laughter] Think about that! It is our hope which is the confident expectation that our future is secure with Him! Our hope that causes us to live beyond despair and defeat, even when the hard and difficult times come because, yes, life is a wonderful thing, but life can be hard, and life can be hurtful, and nobody gets out of life alive! But it is the fact that we live in Christ, the hope of dying... the fact that we're going to be with Him that keeps us alive in Him. To die is far better. Paul is saying, “I'm ready to go home. This is not my home. Home is with Him.”

You say, “How is that? How do you get to that place?” Or you say, “It's far better on the other side.” Well, think about it. When you choose life and life in Christ, you choose heaven. And heaven is infinitely better. Why? No more pain. No more sorrow. No more heartbreak. No more brokenness. No more pain, no more injuries, no more questions that we can't answer. No more temptation, no more evil that we can't explain. No more suffering, no more devil, no more graves or tombs.

And it's not just the “no mores”... what's not in heaven... that excites us. What is in heaven? That what is a Who and His name is Jesus! It is the fact that heaven is our home because our hearts are already there! The habit of our hearts is to know Him and to love Him! He is there, along with our family and our friends who have gone on before us! Far better!

On the other hand, the other side... death? Far worse. I've heard people say, “Well, the only hell you get is the hell that you get on earth.” Not true! Not true! How do I know it's not true? Listen to the words of Jesus. People don't want to talk about hell. You want to really scatter a room, start talking about hell! [laughter] People don't want to talk about it; preachers don't talk about it. In fact, there are preachers today on... who have written books to tell us there is no hell, or that we simply die and are annihilated if we don't know Christ. On and on...

But what did the Authority on the... on the subject say... what did Jesus say? In Matthew 23, speaking to the self-righteous, He said [Matthew 23:33], *“You serpents! You brood... brood of vipers! How are you going to escape being sentenced to hell?”* Jesus spoke of hell as being a place of outer darkness and of everlasting fire. In Luke chapter 12 He said, *“I tell you, my friend, do not fear those who can kill the body and after that have nothing*

*more they can do to you! But I will warn you whom to fear. Fear Him who after He has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear Him.”*

Here’s what Billy Graham said about this question of hell. “Would a loving God sent a man to hell? The answer from Jesus and the teaching of the Bible is clearly yes. He does not send man willingly but man condemns himself to eternal hell because of his blindness, stubbornness, egotism and love of sinful pleasure. He refuses God’s way of salvation and the hope of eternal life is with him.”

You see, the hell of hell is that God is absent. Yes, it is a fiery, tumultuous, terrifying, horrific place that literally exists. [You] Say “Well, I don’t know. There are some men that... that say no.” Ha, Proverbs 16:25: *“There’s a way that seems right to man but the end thereof is death.”* You better not believe what man says about this; you better believe what God says about this! And the hell of hell is that God is not there. Christ is absent. It is torturous to be without Him throughout all eternity.

Let me say... I have... I take no delight or pleasure in saying people will go to hell. We do so with broken hearts. I don’t want anyone to go that terrible place. Our church exists... our ministries, what we give, how we live, what we do... We exist as a church like fire exists for burning... to try to keep people out of heav... hell by pointing them to heaven and Christ. More importantly than all of that, God doesn’t want anybody to go to hell. [2 Peter 3:9] *“God is not willing,”* Scripture says, *“that any would perish but that all would come to repentance.”* God says, *“I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked!”* God loves you! And if you go to hell it will be soul suicide of your own acc... accord, crawling through the blood of Christ to get there, trampling underfoot His precious blood, who loves you and gave Himself for you! Eternity... life and death, heaven or hell.

Jesus came out of the grave so that you could be with Him forever. Here’s the truth: If you choose Jesus, you choose life with Him forever. Proverbs 23:18: *“Surely there is a future and your hope will not be cut off.”* There is a hope and future in Christ.

Moses called the children of Israel before him one day and said [Deuteronomy 30:19], *“I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I set before you life and death, blessing and cursing. Therefore... therefore, choose life... choose life that you may live.”*

Would you bow your heads with me in prayer?

On this beautiful morning make that choice. In your heart of hearts right now, the part of you that was made for God that God sees and knows... pray a simple prayer like this. You say, “How do I... How can I come to Christ? What do I do?”

Number one, admit that you’ve sinned and broken His commandments. Say, “Lord, I’ve sinned. I’ve gone my own way, I’ve chosen sinful pleasure, I’ve chosen narcissistic... sistic living. My self... I’ve chosen pleasure rather than you. I’ve sinned.” Tell him you’re a sinner. He knows it anyway. He died for you. Admit that you’ve sinned. Say, “Lord, be merciful to me a sinner.” And then affirm that Jesus is Lord of life, Lord of death. [Romans 10:9] *“If we confess with our mouths the Lord Jesus and believe in our hearts that God has raised Him from the dead, we will be saved.”* Affirm it, believe it! And then ask him to come into your life. Pray a simple prayer:

*Lord Jesus, I invite You to come into my life. I believe, I receive You as my Lord and Savior. Because You died for me and rose again, I’m trusting in You and You only... You and You only, not in the ways of man but in the way of Christ.*

Now, I’m looking all across this room and I... I... I see thousands of people. But God sees every person and God knows every heart. In just a moment I’m going to ask you if you are praying to receive Christ today... all

together if you are this day trusting in Christ... you just prayed that prayer with me, as an act of confession of faith, I want you to lift your hand. We're all going to do this together, the same time... those that are praying this prayer. I'm not talking about people who are members of the church here and so on. I'm talking about you who are praying this prayer. You're inviting Christ into your life today.

As an act of confession, when I say, “go” in just a moment... when I say “go” I want you to lift your hand and keep it up for just a moment where I can see it. And I can see all the way to the back row of balcony. I don't want anybody else looking around. This is not between you and somebody else. It's between you and the Lord. But it's a way that you can confess your faith in Christ. So when I say “go” I want you to lift your hand and say, “Today I'm receiving; I'm turning from my sin and trusting in Christ. I'm choosing life over death.”

I'm not going to come to you, I'm not going to embarrasses you, I'm not going to point you out. But this a way that you can confess your faith today. Go. Hold up your hand. All over this room, hold them up. Keep them up for just a moment, in the balcony. Hold up your hand. “I'm receiving Christ today.”

*Lord, I thank You for every one of these. I pray that You would give them now the assurance that this was more than a prayer, but a powerful miracle in their lives. give them the grace they need to live for You and to walk with You. And remember the Scripture which says, “These things are written that you may know that you have eternal life.” And so I pray that you would help these to know, not just to think it or... or hope that it's true, but Lord, to know that it's true.” As I saw hundreds of hands go up, that these would walk out of this building new in Christ, alive in Christ. For we pray in Jesus' name. Amen*