

The Three Choices

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God cares how his people live.¹ We often think of the Old Testament as characterized by Law, but the New Testament is also full of commands. Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount is a treasure chest of ethical instruction. Paul's letters have many imperative verbs, telling people how they should live. Even his most doctrinal epistles, Romans and Ephesians, have practical sections (Eph 4-6; Rom 10-16) with many commands.

It's true that we are saved by God's grace, completely apart from any work or merit on our part. Eph 2:8-9 teaches that:

Eph 2:8 For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: *it is* the gift of God: 9 Not of works, lest any man should boast.

But we shouldn't stop at v. 9. The next verse goes on to insist,

Eph 2:10 For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto **good works**, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.

God's purpose in saving us is that we would do good works. In fact, he has preordained that result. It's not optional. The result of the Spirit's work in us is that "the righteousness of the law" will be "fulfilled in us" (Rom 8:4).

This biblical emphasis is needed because our natural inclination is not to obey the Lord, but to rebel against him. James traces all sin to our internal drives, or lusts:

Jam 1:13 Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man: 14 But every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed. 15 Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death.

Throughout the Bible, we find a remarkably consistent analysis of these internal drives. There are three of them, and they constantly confront us with Three Choices that we must make over and over again if we are to be pleasing to the Lord. The frequency with which the Spirit records them in the lives of Bible characters suggests that the Lord wants us to recognize them. If we better understand ourselves and our natural weaknesses, we will find it easier to resist the adversary's efforts to lead us into conduct that is displeasing to our Lord. Instead of the persistent defeat that frustrates many believers, we will experience increasing victory in our Christian lives, and produce the good works for which God has created us.

Two central passages spell out these Three Choices: Deut 6:4-6 in the Old Testament, and 1 John 2:16 in the New Testament. Let's begin by exploring them. Then we will study numerous passages in both the Old Testament and the New that show how these Choices emerge repeatedly, and give us some practical examples to help us recognize them in our lives.

¹ I develop this theme at considerable length in the paper on Law and the Christian Life (<http://www.cyber-chapel.org/LawAndTheChristianLife.pdf>), which should be read along with this paper.

1 The Three Choices Defined in the OT: Deut 6:4-5

To a Jew, Deut 6:4,5 is perhaps the most sacred verse in the Bible:

Deu 6:4 Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God *is* one LORD: 5 And thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might.

It is called the *Shema*, after its first word in Hebrew, “Hear.”² Moses tells the people to keep this instruction continually in mind, and to this day, it dominates their devotion.

I provide much more information about the *Shema* in another study.³ For our purposes, let’s focus on the command in v. 5, which emphasizes three requirements. These are our first introduction to the Three Choices that we must constantly make in order to live godly lives.

Moses describes three channels through which we are to love the Lord our God: the heart, the soul, and what our version translates as our “might” (a translation that we can improve). We must choose to dedicate each of these completely to the Lord.

Heart

The heart⁴ in Hebrew thought is closely related to our western sense of “mind.” The Greek translations in common use in the first century sometimes translate it by “mind,”⁵ which is why some of the quotations of the verse in the gospels, written in Greek, use the word “mind.” The use of the word throughout the Old Testament shows that the heart is the locus of *psychology*. The Bible describes several facets of our psychology as rooted in the heart.

It is where we feel *emotion*, such as joy and sorrow.

1Sa 2:1 And Hannah prayed, and said, **My heart rejoiceth** in the LORD,

Neh 2:2 Wherefore the king said unto me, Why *is* thy countenance sad, seeing thou *art* not sick? this *is* nothing *else* but **sorrow of heart**.

It is the seat of the *intellect*, the home of thoughts and wisdom and the target of deceit.

Gen 6:5 and *that* every imagination of **the thoughts of his heart** *was* only evil continually.

2Ch 9:23 And all the kings of the earth sought the presence of Solomon, **to hear his wisdom, that God had put in his heart**.

Isa 44:20 He feedeth on ashes: a **deceived heart** hath turned him aside,

It is the organ of *will*, with which we make decisions:

Jdg 9:3 And his mother's brethren spake of him in the ears of all the men of Shechem all

2 Strong's number H8085, שמע

3 <http://www.cyber-chapel.org/sermons/deut/notes/ShemaInTheNT.pdf>

4 Strong's number H3824, לב

5 Strong's number G1271, δαυοια

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these words: and their **hearts inclined to follow** Abimelech; for they said, He *is* our brother.

The heart is the organ involved in *pride* in the OT. We often read of a “proud heart.”

Psa 101:5 him that hath an high look and a **proud heart** will not I suffer.

Pro 16:5 Every one that is **proud in heart** is an abomination to the LORD: though hand join in hand, he shall not be unpunished.

Pro 21:4 An high look, and a **proud heart**, and the plowing of the wicked, is sin.

Another common expression for pride is having the heart “lifted up”:

Deu 17:20 That his **heart be not lifted up** above his brethren

2Ch 32:25 But Hezekiah rendered not again according to the benefit *done* unto him; for **his heart was lifted up**: therefore there was wrath upon him, and upon Judah and Jerusalem.

Dan 5:20 But when his **heart was lifted up**, and his mind hardened in pride, he was deposed from his kingly throne, and they took his glory from him:

So the heart describes our inner life, our sense of self, our person. The heart comes before the soul and the “might” because it controls them. Sometimes the OT talks about loving God with all three. If it names only two of them, they are the heart and soul, and if it names only one, it is always the heart.

The heart is a precious gift from God. Without a sense of self, we cannot engage in social relations with one another, or conceive of our relation with God, or love, or have compassion. But if our heart is not completely dedicated to the Lord, our sense of self will turn into selfishness and pride. If our sense of self, our person, is not completely dedicated to the Lord, we will be exposed to temptation and sin.

Soul

Man is first of all heart, but we also have bodies. Where the heart refers to our psychology, the soul⁶ refers to the physical life force, and commonly means “physical life.” Its domain is *physiology*.

The first four uses of the word are in Gen 1:20 21, 24, 30, in the phrase “living creature,”⁷ which also appears at the creation of man:

Gen 2:7 And the LORD God formed man *of* the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a **living soul**.

After the flood, when God forbids murder, he uses this word to describe human life:

6 Strong's H5315, נפש

7 נפש חיה

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Gen 9:4 But flesh with the **life** thereof, which is the blood thereof, shall ye not eat. 5 And surely your blood of your **lives** will I require; at the hand of every beast will I require it, and at the hand of man; at the hand of every man's brother will I require the **life** of man.

Like the heart, the soul is a wonderful gift. Our body is a remarkable machine. It has sensors that tell us when we need food or water or sleep, and remind us of God's command to replenish the earth. Without these sensors, some of us would be so focused on our work that we would forget to eat and drink! But our physical appetites can be a major channel for temptation. If we do not dedicate our soul, our biological life force, completely to the Lord, we will use it as an end in its own right, stimulating ourselves simply to find pleasure, and exposing ourselves to ungodly conduct.

“Might”

The word translated “might” is not the usual Hebrew word that is translated in this way.⁸ Instead, it is a word⁹ that is overwhelmingly used as an adverb meaning “very” or “much.” The only two places in the OT where it appears as a noun are Deut 6:5 and 2 Kings 23:25, which is an allusion to Deut 6:5. But there is a Rabbinic tradition that the word refers to wealth rather than to physical strength,¹⁰ and the word appears twice as a noun in the Damascus Document (a pre-Christian Hebrew text found at Qumran) with the meaning of “property.” So it is likely that as a noun, it means “abundance, wealth,” and is not primarily a reference to physical might.

The heart and soul are interior to us. The abundance is external. It is what we gather around us, by the strength of the soul and under the guidance of the heart. If the heart is psychology and the soul is physiology, the “muchness” is *economy*. We can envision these as concentric circles: the heart at the center, controlling our body, which in turn acts upon the things we gather around us (Figure 1). All three are channels through which we can love things, and God commands that all three be devoted entirely to him, leaving nothing for any other god. The Three Choices that we must continually make are to protect each of these facets of our being, psychology, physiology, and economy, from being used to serve other masters, and completely devoting each of them to the Lord.

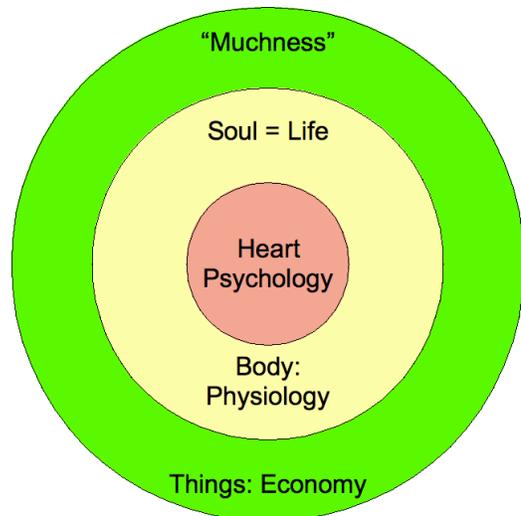


Figure 1: The Three Channels of Love (after Block, *JETS* 47:2 (2004) p. 203)

8 That would be Strong's H2428, חֵיל

9 Strong's H3966, מְאֹד

10 Babylonian Talmud, *Berachot* 61b

2 The Three Choices Defined in the New Testament: 1 John 2:15-16

The same three challenges that we saw in Deut 6:4-5 are also articulated in 1 John 2:15-16.

1Jo 2:15 Love not the world, neither the things *that are* in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. 16 For all that *is* in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. 17 And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever.

Like Moses, John poses the Choices in terms of what it means to love God. Moses expresses the priorities positively: we must love the Lord with all of our heart, soul, and abundance, and if we do that, we will have no affection for anything else. John presents the matter from the negative side. He warns us against loving the world, because if we do, we will not be able to love the Father. But like Moses, John sees Three Choices that we must keep straight.

First, he warns about “the lust of the flesh.” This Choice is the one that Moses teaches us to overcome when he speaks of loving the Lord with all of our soul, that is, all of our life force. The lust of the flesh is driven by the biological feedbacks that we need to keep our bodies operating and to perpetuate humanity. In their place, they are a blessing, but the world urges us to treat them as an end in themselves, a means of amusing ourselves that we should try to stimulate as much as possible.

Next, he turns to “the lust of the eyes,” the love of beautiful things. Like the other Choices, this innate human tendency has its place. It enables us to appreciate the beauty of nature so that we can worship God for his creation. But the world tells us that we deserve more than simply to enjoy the view. It encourages us to seek to possess and control beautiful things themselves. Moses is equipping us against this facet of the world when he tells us to love the Lord with all our abundance. If we do not choose to devote all of our possessions to the Lord, we will end up worshipping them rather than God.

John’s third category is “the pride of life.” In Deut 6:5, we are to love God first of all with our heart. We saw that the Old Testament uses the heart to describe our sense of self, and that when we do not subject it to the Lord, it becomes the seat of pride. It is wonderful to be able to relate to others, but when our sense of the distinction between ourselves and others leads us to think of ourselves as better than others, we have fallen into sin.

John says that “all that is in the world” boils down to these three innate human drives. God gave them to us for a purpose, but if we do not commit them entirely to the Lord as Moses commands, they will lead us into sin. If we would live lives that are truly pleasing to our heavenly Father, we must see not only that we love God as Moses commands, but that we reject the love of the world as John instructs us. The same Three Choices are at play.

Figure 1 emphasizes the alignment between the injunctions of Deut 6:4-5 and John 2:15-16, and their relation to the two main tools that God has given us for godliness, his Spirit and his law.

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- Both passages focus on love. Godliness does not start with rules of behavior, either in the Old Testament or in the New Testament. It begins with fixing our love upon the right object. We often think of the Old Testament as negative and condemning and the New Testament as positive and edifying. But in this case, the Old Testament summary emphasizes the positive focus of our Love, the Lord our God, while the New Testament warns us what not to love.

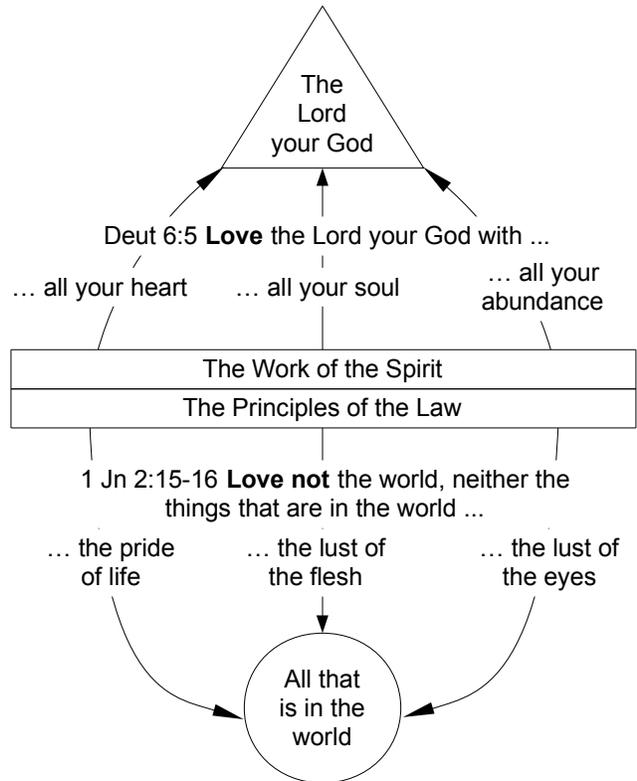


Figure 2: The Two Summaries of the Triple Challenge (after a sketch by Gene Parunak)

- The passages deal with the same three fundamental drives: our sense of self, rooted in the heart, that can lead to pride; the physical desires that stem from the soul, the life force, and make our bodies work; and our appreciation for beauty that leads to our desire for possessions. Each has a purpose in God's creation, and if we choose to devote them wholly to God, they will glorify him. But if we usurp them for our own amusement, we have abandoned his kingdom and we are serving the prince of this world.
- As discussed in an earlier paper, *Law and the Christian Life*,¹¹ God has given us two resources to guide us in loving him with all of our heart, soul, and abundance, and to lead us away from dissipating these treasures on the world. Under the Old Covenant, the central resource was his law, enforced by a political state, the nation Israel. Under the New Covenant, he has placed his Spirit within us so that we can live lives that please him even in a kingdom that today is not of this world (John 18:36). The law tells us what is expected of us, but only the Spirit can give us the power to achieve it, a distinction we will see in the next section, when we study the temptations of Eve and of our Lord.

¹¹ <http://www.cyber-chapel.org/LawAndTheChristianLife.pdf>

3 Gen 3:4-6 and Matthew 3:4: Failure and Victory

Moses and John present the Three Choices analytically, as a neat theological package. But they are so central to the human condition that once we understand them, we can recognize them in many different episodes that the Bible records. The first of these is temptation of Eve in Genesis 3, where she makes the wrong choice in each case. When our Lord is tempted at the start of his ministry, he faces the same Three Choices, and makes the right one each time.

The failure of Eve in Genesis 3

In Genesis, the Serpent tempts Eve to disobey the Lord's command not to eat of one particular tree in the garden. This temptation naturally draws her attention to the tree, and Moses records what she notices about it.

Gen 3:6 And when the woman saw that the tree *was* good for food, and that it *was* pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make *one* wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat.

Compare what she observes about this tree with what is said about the other trees in the garden:

Gen 2:9 And out of the ground made the LORD God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

Each of these three features of the forbidden tree that Eve notices recalls one element of the triple challenge.

The tree was good for food.—Gen 2:9 says that many of the other trees in the garden were also good for food. She hardly needs this one to provide necessary nourishment. Her craving for food goes beyond the legitimate biological function of hunger. She chooses to titillate her soul, that is, her life energy, rather than devoting it entirely to the Lord. She falls to the lust of the flesh.

The tree was ... pleasant to the eyes.—Just as this tree was not the only source of food, it was also not the only attractive tree, according to 2:9. Eve can rejoice her heart in the beauty of God's creation without ever contemplating the forbidden tree. But Moses alerts us that something is different about her reaction to this tree. The word "pleasant" in 3:6 represents a different Hebrew word than the same English word in 2:9. She feels, not just feel delight¹² in the tree, as in 2:9, but a powerful lust¹³ תאוה. Instead of worshipping the Lord for the abundance that he has placed around her, she chooses to fantasize what it would be like if she could control it, fanning her infatuation into an undeniable craving to possess the tree. She falls to the lust of the eyes.

Desired to make wise.—2:9 says nothing about becoming wise, but this element of the temptation takes its power from the Serpent's suggestion that God is withholding the tree from her and Adam to keep them in a position of inferiority to himself. The Serpent says,

12 קמד, Strong's H2530

13 תאוה, Strong's H8378

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Gen 3:5 For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil.

Her sense of self is offended. She doesn't want to be inferior to God, and now she is told that this tree can give her the knowledge she needs to be like a god. Instead of bowing her heart before the Lord, she chooses to assert her independence, and falls to the pride of life.

Our Lord's triumph in Matthew 3-4

All three synoptic gospels record that at the start of his ministry, our Lord also faced satanic temptation, but with a very different outcome than what we see in the garden of Eden. We'll consider Matthew's account in Matt 4:1-10.

The chapter division is misleading. The record of the temptation actually begins with the Lord's baptism.

Mat 3:16 And Jesus, when he was baptized, went up straightway out of the water: and, lo, the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him: 17 And lo a voice from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. 4:1 Then was Jesus led up of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil.

There are two links between the baptism and the temptations. The first is that throughout the temptations, Satan repeatedly challenges the Lord, "If thou be the Son of God." He is questioning the Father's declaration at the baptism, and trying to dislodge the Lord from his loyalty to his Father. We'll consider the second link after we review the three temptations. These present the same Three Choices that faced Eve.

Lust of the flesh.--The adversary's first attack, as with Eve, concerns physical appetites.¹⁴ Eve, surrounded by many trees that were "good for food," had no excuse for failure here, but our Lord's preparation for the temptation leaves him particularly vulnerable.

Mat 4:2 And when he had fasted forty days and forty nights, he was afterward an hungred. 3 And when the tempter came to him, he said, If thou be the Son of God, command that these stones be made bread. 4 But he answered and said, It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God.

Eve neglected the clear word of God that told her what was right and wrong. But our Lord answers temptation with the word of God and is victorious. He is hungry, but his hunger does not rule him. If the Spirit has led him to the wilderness where there is no food, he will not overturn that guidance and create food. He chooses to love the Lord with all of his soul.

Pride of life.--Next, Satan appeals to the Lord's pride, to his sense of self as he relates to others.

5 Then the devil taketh him up into the holy city, and setteth him on a pinnacle of the temple, 6 And saith unto him, If thou be the Son of God, cast thyself down: for it is

¹⁴ Matthew and Luke agree that this temptation was the first, though they differ in the order of the second and third.

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written, He shall give his angels charge concerning thee: and in *their* hands they shall bear thee up, lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone. 7 Jesus said unto him, It is written again, Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God.

This temptation urges him to demonstrate his authority as Son of God over both the angels, and the people of Israel. By forcing the angels to carry him, he would show that he is superior to them. There were many dizzying precipices in the wilderness that would serve this purpose. By carrying out the demonstration at the temple, the Lord would present himself dramatically to the people, and ensure their rapid and enthusiastic support for his mission. Again, the Lord responds with Scripture. His heart recognizes that he is the Son of God, but his mission is not to advance that claim himself. He devotes his sense of self to serving his Father, and he will let the Father advance him to honor at the appropriate time. He chooses to love the Lord with all of his heart.

Lust of the eyes.--The third challenge seeks to pervert our appreciation for beauty into a demand to possess, and Satan now attacks along that line.

8 Again, the devil taketh him up into an exceeding high mountain, and sheweth him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them; 9 And saith unto him, All these things will I give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me. 10 Then saith Jesus unto him, Get thee hence, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve.

John calls this challenge “the lust of the eyes.” Eve “saw that the tree was ... pleasant to the eyes.” So Satan “shewed him” something attractive: all the kingdoms of the world, and their glory. The Lord’s sense of beauty could certainly appreciate the grandeur of this sight, and Satan urges him to claim possession of it. But Jesus chooses to love the Lord with all of his abundance. He will not seek any possession that would compromise his relation to his Father. Again, he is triumphant where Eve failed.

Our Lord faces the Three Choices that Moses and John spell out, the same Three Choices on which Eve fell. What made the difference?

This question takes us back to the baptism. At the baptism, not only did the Father declare the Lord to be his Son, but the Spirit descended upon him. In Genesis, the Holy Spirit was involved in the creation of the world, “mov[ing] upon the face of the waters” (Gen 1:2), but he is not mentioned in the creation of Adam and Eve. Moses records of Adam, “man became a living soul” (Gen 2:7). “Soul” here is the same word that describes the life force in Deut 6:5. But he was not given the Holy Spirit. Without the indwelling Spirit of God, man is incomplete, and incapable of ruling his own lusts. The Lord’s ability to make the right decision in each of the Three Choices results directly from his endowment with the Spirit at the baptism.¹⁵

¹⁵ I discuss this point in much further detail in the second chapter of my studies on the kingdom of God, available at http://www.cyber-chapel.org/sermons/special/KingdomOfGod/SeekingTheKingdom_Notes.pdf.

4 Israel in the Wilderness

To appreciate the lessons that Israel's history holds for believers today, we need to realize that they, like we, were a redeemed people, and that the basis for their relation to the Lord was his unmerited favor, the same basis on which we are saved. The Old Testament describes Israel's deliverance from bondage in Egypt as a redemption:

Deu 7:7 The LORD did not set his love upon you, nor choose you, because ye were more in number than any people; for ye *were* the fewest of all people: 8 But because the LORD loved you, and because he would keep the oath which he had sworn unto your fathers, hath the LORD brought you out with a mighty hand, and **redeemed you** out of the house of bondmen, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.

He makes clear that he redeemed them because he loved them, not because of any qualification on their part. Their subsequent history shows just how unqualified they were. Whether in the Old Testament or the New Testament, newly redeemed people have many difficulties and frequently stumble. No sooner has Israel come out of Egypt than they begin to sin, over and over again. By the time they refuse to enter the land of promise, God says,

Num 14:22 all those men which have seen my glory, and my miracles, which I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and have tempted me now these ten times, and have not hearkened to my voice; 23 Surely they shall not see the land which I swore unto their fathers, neither shall any of them that provoked me see it:

Nor is their failure to enter the land the end of their sin, as the later chapters of Numbers record. Studying their failure can help us cope with the temptations we face as people redeemed by grace.

All of Israel's sins in the wilderness fall into one or another of the Three Choices that we have discussed. Let's briefly review them.

Their most common error is yielding to the lust of the flesh, choosing to satisfy their own biological desires rather than loving the Lord with all their soul. First, they are unwilling to obey the Lord when they feel their lives are at risk, when Egypt pursues them to the shore of the Red Sea (Exod 14:11-12), and later when they refuse to enter the land for fear of the opposition they would face (Numbers 13-14). Second, over and over they complain about the lack of food and drink. They complain about inadequate water (Exod 15:23; 17:2; Num 20:13), the lack of food (Exod 16:2-3; Num 21:5), and the boring nature of the food (Num 11:4), and disobey the Lord's instructions about the manna in fear that they would run out or go hungry (Exod 16:20, 27). Third, even at the end of their wandering, with forty years of experience of God's faithfulness, they fall into sexual sin (Numbers 25).

They are also subject to the pride of life. Twice they choose to rebel against the authority that God has established, in the rebellion of Miriam and Aaron against Moses (Numbers 12), and the rebellion of Korah (Numbers 16). In addition, Num 11:1 says simply, "The people complained." We are not told what they complained about, but their offense was serious enough that the Lord

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kindled fire among them, and Moses had to intercede to arrest the judgment. This episode focuses our attention on the sinfulness of complaining in and of itself. Complaint is the symptom of a proud heart that insists on having its own way, rather than being completely yielded to the Lord.

The most notable sin of Israel in the wilderness is not connected with the flesh, and does not seem to be an act of pride, but is a vivid example of not loving the Lord with our abundance. It happens while Moses is on Mount Sinai, receiving the law from God. The history records,

Exo 32:1 And when the people saw that Moses delayed to come down out of the mount, the people gathered themselves together unto Aaron, and said unto him, Up, make us gods, which shall go before us; for *as for* this Moses, the man that brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we wot not what is become of him.

The people were upset by what they saw...or rather, by what they didn't see, which was Moses. And though they had been so terrified of the thunder and lightening on Mount Sinai that they feared to encounter God personally (Exod 20:18, 19), now they choose a visible god to be over them.

Aaron obliges their lust. Notice where he gets the resources to craft for them an idol:

Exo 32:2 And Aaron said unto them, Break off the golden earrings, which *are* in the ears of your wives, of your sons, and of your daughters, and bring *them* unto me. 3 And all the people brake off the golden earrings which *were* in their ears, and brought *them* unto Aaron. 4 And he received *them* at their hand, and fashioned it with a graving tool, after he had made it a molten calf: and they said, These *be* thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt.

We might think it strange that a slave people have golden earrings, but this jewelry is part of the endowment God gave them when they left Egypt. When he first called Moses, he promised,

Exo 3:21 And I will give this people favour in the sight of the Egyptians: and it shall come to pass, that, when ye go, ye shall not go empty: 22 But every woman shall borrow of her neighbour, and of her that sojourneth in her house, jewels of silver, and jewels of gold, and raiment: and ye shall put them upon your sons, and upon your daughters; and ye shall spoil the Egyptians.

So at the time of the Exodus, we read,

Exo 12:35 And the children of Israel did according to the word of Moses; and they borrowed of the Egyptians jewels of silver, and jewels of gold, and raiment: 36 And the LORD gave the people favour in the sight of the Egyptians, so that they lent unto them *such things as they required*. And they spoiled the Egyptians.

We should not be misled by the archaic use of the verbs “borrowed” and “lent.” The Israelites did not promise that they would ever return these goods. The Hebrew verbs mean simply “ask” and “give.” God graciously led the Egyptians to pay them for their past labor. The Psalmist later recalls his bounty to them:

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Psa 105:37 He brought them forth also with silver and gold: and there was not one feeble person among their tribes.

But now they take their abundance, which is God's gracious gift to them, and give it to Aaron to fashion a rival god! Instead of loving God with all their abundance, they choose to abandon him, so that they can satisfy the lust of their eyes for tangible evidence of a god.

This pattern, of diverting God's bounty to idolatry, continues to plague Israel. During the Babylonian captivity, God will lament through Ezekiel,

Eze 16:17 Thou hast also taken thy fair jewels of my gold and of my silver, which I had given thee, and madest to thyself images of men, and didst commit whoredom with them,

“Whoredom” here is a reference to spiritual infidelity, that is, idolatry. Throughout her history, whenever God graciously allows Israel to prosper, she does not love the Lord with that abundance, but rather it turns her away to idols. With good reason, Paul teaches us that covetousness, the desire for things, the lust of the eyes, is a form of idolatry (Col 3:5).

Moses records the synthesis of Deut 6:4-5 after all these events took place, when Israel arrives at the plains of Moab after wandering for forty years. Perhaps the Lord uses his recollection of these many sins to guide him in formulating the Three Choices to love the Lord with all the heart, soul, and abundance.

In contrasting the choices made by Eve and our Lord, we noticed that he, unlike her, was empowered by the Holy Spirit. Similarly, while both we and Israel are redeemed by grace, the Holy Spirit is an important distinction between us. Israel lived under the covenant of Sinai, but God promised through Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel that he would replace that covenant with a new one.¹⁶

Isa 59:21 As for me, this *is* my **covenant** with them, saith the LORD; **My spirit** that *is* upon thee, and **my words** which I have put in thy mouth, shall not depart out of thy mouth, nor out of the mouth of thy seed, nor out of the mouth of thy seed's seed, saith the LORD, from henceforth and for ever.

Jer 31:31 Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that I will make a **new covenant** with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah: 32 Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day *that* I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt; which my covenant they brake, although I was an husband unto them, saith the LORD: 33 But this *shall be* the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the LORD, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people.

Eze 36:25 Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean: from all your filthiness, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you. ... 27 And I will put **my spirit** within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and

¹⁶ More details on this new covenant and its relation to the Holy Spirit are in the second chapter of http://www.cyber-chapel.org/sermons/special/KingdomOfGod/SeekingTheKingdom_Notes.pdf.

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do *them*.

A critical feature of the new covenant that distinguishes it from the covenant of Sinai is the promise of the indwelling Holy Spirit. Shortly before his sacrifice, which ratified the new covenant, the Lord reminded his disciples of this promised indwelling Spirit:

Joh 14:17 he dwelleth with you, and shall be in you.

Under the Old Covenant, the Spirit was with God's people, and came upon them for special tasks. But under the New Covenant, he dwells within his people, prompting their choices and strengthening them for victory. This promise was fulfilled on the day of Pentecost.

In comparing the temptations of Eve and our Lord, we saw that the secret to his victory where she failed is in the power of the Holy Spirit. In the same way, as we contemplate Israel's failures, we learn how we will be tempted, but we should not be discouraged that we will fare no better than they. As we mature in our Christian lives, we become "spiritual" (1 Cor 3:15), a reference to the control of the Holy Spirit over us, leading us to make the right choices and enabling us to love the Lord with all of our heart, soul, and abundance.

5 The Royal Failure

The Three Choices help us understand not only the fall in the garden of Eden, and Israel's failures in the wilderness, but also the failure of the Israelite monarchy to establish God's rule over the earth. Moses gives clear instructions concerning how the king is to rule, instructions that directly reflect the Three Choices of Deut 6:4-5. Solomon, who represents the pinnacle of Israel's kingship, failed systematically on all three points, and his successors did no better.

The Warning in Deuteronomy 17

Moses clearly instructs the people concerning acceptable conduct on the part of any king whom Israel might choose. He gives five requirements for this king. The first two requirements establish his *qualifications* for the position, while the last three regulate his *conduct* once he assumes office.

Consider first the qualifications. He must be one whom the Lord has chosen:

Deu 17:14 When thou art come unto the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee, and shalt possess it, and shalt dwell therein, and shalt say, I will set a king over me, like as all the nations that *are* about me; 15a Thou shalt in any wise set *him* king over thee, whom the LORD thy God shall choose:

In addition, he must be an Israelite, and not a foreigner:

15b *one* from among thy brethren shalt thou set king over thee: thou mayest not set a stranger over thee, which *is* not thy brother.

Our concern is with the three regulations that govern his conduct as king. All three are negative, warning against behavior that displeases the Lord:

16 But he shall not multiply horses to himself, nor cause the people to return to Egypt, to the end that he should multiply horses: forasmuch as the LORD hath said unto you, Ye shall henceforth return no more that way. 17 Neither shall he multiply wives to himself, that his heart turn not away: neither shall he greatly multiply to himself silver and gold.

These three prohibitions remind Israel's monarchs of the Three Choices. To see the relation, let's start with the third:

17b neither shall he greatly multiply to himself silver and gold.--The king's power makes it possible for him to amass considerable wealth, a clear manifestation of the lust of the eyes. If he is obedient to Deut 6:4-5, he must love the Lord with all of his abundance. Choosing to hoard it "to himself" violates this principle. He should use his wealth to advance the Lord's work, not for his own sake.

Now consider the second:

17 Neither shall he multiply wives to himself, that his heart turn not away:--One of the main manifestations of the lust of the flesh is in sexual passion. As we have seen, this drive has its

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necessary role in our physical life, and God has provided for its satisfaction in the context of biblical marriage. But people who do not love the Lord with all of their life force choose passion for its own sake. Kings are particularly vulnerable to this problem, because they have the financial resources to support a large harem.

The custom of royal harems showed not only the lust of the flesh, but also the pride of life.¹⁷ In the ancient world (and in fact through the 19th century even in Europe), the marriage of a princess from one nation to the monarch of another was an important tool of diplomacy, a process we will shortly observe in the life of Solomon. Later, the northern King Ahab sought an alliance with Sidon by marrying a Sidonian princess named Jezebel (1 Kings 16:31). An ambitious king could excuse the growth of his harem by the need to maintain good relations with neighboring states.

Moses points out a very practical danger in these diplomatic marriages: the king's "heart" might "turn away" from the Lord. In biblical times, each nation thought of itself as being under the patronage of its own deity. Recall the words of Jephthah to the rulers of Ammon who challenged Israel's right to their territory east of the Jordan:

Jdg 11:24 Wilt not thou possess that which Chemosh thy god giveth thee to possess? So whomsoever the LORD our God shall drive out from before us, them will we possess.

Making an alliance with a foreign princess meant accommodating her gods, which ran the risk of luring her royal husband into apostasy from the Lord. Failing to love the Lord God with all of one's life force and pursuing diplomatic marriages to satisfy the flesh could lead directly to the worship of other gods, which is a failure to love the Lord with all of one's heart as well.

Clearly, the second and third of the three warnings reflect the Three Choices. That leads us to expect that the first will also.

16 But he shall not multiply horses to himself, nor cause the people to return to Egypt, to the end that he should multiply horses:--To understand the relation between the first warning and the Three Choices, we need to consider the role of horses in biblical times.

Horses were primarily a weapon of war:

Pro 21:31 The horse *is* prepared against the day of battle: but safety *is* of the LORD.

In the agricultural economy of Israel, oxen and donkeys (asses) were widely used, but not horses. The Law of Moses, tailored for the needs of an agricultural people, is full of regulations concerning the ox and the ass:

Exo 20:17 Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his **ox**, nor his **ass**, nor any thing that *is* thy neighbour's.

Exo 21:33-34 And if a man shall open a pit, or if a man shall dig a pit, and not cover it, and an **ox** or an **ass** fall therein; 34 The owner of the pit shall make *it* good

¹⁷ We will see a similar mixing of the Three Choices in our study of Ezekiel 28 in the next chapter.

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Exo 23:4 If thou meet thine enemy's **ox** or his **ass** going astray, thou shalt surely bring it back to him again.

Exo 23:12 Six days thou shalt do thy work, and on the seventh day thou shalt rest: that thine **ox** and thine **ass** may rest, and the son of thy handmaid, and the stranger, may be refreshed.

But other than Deut 17:16 or historical references to the armies of other countries, the law never mentions horses.

Egypt had many horses as part of its military. To an army of foot soldiers, the speed and power of horsemen and chariots was a terrible sight, and Israel required special reassurance in dealing with neighbors who had access to this superweapon:

Deu 20:1 When thou goest out to battle against thine enemies, and seest **horses**, and chariots, *and* a people more than thou, be not afraid of them: for the LORD thy God *is* with thee, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt.

Repeatedly, the Lord demonstrates his power by enabling Israel to defeat enemies whose armies had horses. In vain Pharaoh brought such a force against Israel at the Red Sea:

Exo 14:9 But the Egyptians pursued after them, all the **horses** *and* chariots of Pharaoh, and his horsemen, and his army, and overtook them encamping by the sea, beside Pihahiroth, before Baalzephon. 10 And when Pharaoh drew nigh, the children of Israel lifted up their eyes, and, behold, the Egyptians marched after them; and they were sore afraid:

Exo 15:19 For the horse of Pharaoh went in with his chariots and with his **horsemen** into the sea, and the LORD brought again the waters of the sea upon them;

When the kings of the north sought to confederate against Joshua and the invading Israelites, they trusted in their horses, only to meet with utter defeat:

Jos 11:4 And they went out, they and all their hosts with them, much people, even as the sand that *is* upon the sea shore in multitude, with **horses** and chariots very many. ... 9 And Joshua did unto them as the LORD bade him: he houghed their horses, and burnt their chariots with fire.

At the battle of Michmash, the Philistines' multitude of horsemen and chariots could not stand against a small force of the Lord's people:

1Sa 13:5 And the Philistines gathered themselves together to fight with Israel, thirty thousand chariots, and six thousand **horsemen**, and people as the sand which *is* on the sea shore in multitude: ... 14:23 So the LORD saved Israel that day ...

A country's prestige on the world stage has always depended on its possession of the current dominant weapon. Horses were to nations in the ancient world what nuclear weapons are to nations today. No nation in our day considers itself a military power unless it has nuclear capability, and in biblical days, no nation without horses and chariots could command military

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respect from its neighbors. Against this background, the Lord's command to the king not to "multiply horses" fits perfectly with the Three Choices. It warns him against allowing his heart to become proud and self-confident by trusting in his military might.

Psa 20:7 Some *trust* in chariots, and some in horses: but we will remember the name of the LORD our God.

Solomon's failure

From a secular perspective, the reign of Solomon was Israel's high point. But the sacred historian describes this reign in a way that makes it clear that Solomon directly disobeyed the three warnings of Deut 17:16-17, and after his death, the kingdom split into two parts and then began the decline that ended in the Assyrian and Babylonian captivities. The three themes of pursuing horses, wives, and gold are the framework of 1 Kings 10:14-11:8.

First, we read of his efforts to enrich himself physically, increasing his abundance for his own glory.

1 Kings 10:14 Now the weight of gold that came to Solomon in one year was six hundred threescore and six talents of gold, 15 Beside *that he had* of the merchantmen, and of the traffick of the spice merchants, and of all the kings of Arabia, and of the governors of the country. 16 And king Solomon made two hundred targets *of* beaten gold: six hundred *shekels* of gold went to one target. 17 And *he made* three hundred shields *of* beaten gold; three pound of gold went to one shield: and the king put them in the house of the forest of Lebanon. 18 Moreover the king made a great throne of ivory, and overlaid it with the best gold. 19 The throne had six steps, and the top of the throne *was* round behind: and *there were* stays on either side on the place of the seat, and two lions stood beside the stays. 20 And twelve lions stood there on the one side and on the other upon the six steps: there was not the like made in any kingdom. 21 And all king Solomon's drinking vessels *were of* gold, and all the vessels of the house of the forest of Lebanon *were of* pure gold; none *were of* silver: it was nothing accounted of in the days of Solomon. 22 For the king had at sea a navy of Tharshish with the navy of Hiram: once in three years came the navy of Tharshish, bringing gold, and silver, ivory, and apes, and peacocks. 23 So king Solomon exceeded all the kings of the earth for riches and for wisdom. 24 And all the earth sought to Solomon, to hear his wisdom, which God had put in his heart. 25 And they brought every man his present, vessels of silver, and vessels of gold, and garments, and armour, and spices, horses, and mules, a rate year by year.

Next the historian records his efforts to amass military power so that his neighbors would respect him.

26 And Solomon gathered together chariots and horsemen: and he had a thousand and four hundred chariots, and twelve thousand horsemen, whom he bestowed in the cities for chariots, and with the king at Jerusalem. 27 And the king made silver *to be* in Jerusalem as stones, and cedars made he *to be* as the sycamore trees that *are* in the vale, for

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abundance. 28 And Solomon had horses brought out of Egypt, and from Que:¹⁸ the king's merchants imported from Que at a price. 29 And a chariot came up and went out of Egypt for six hundred *shekels* of silver, and an horse for an hundred and fifty: and so for all the kings of the Hittites, and for the kings of Syria, did they bring *them* out by their means.

Ultimately, it was the lust of the flesh that led to his greatest sin, through enlarging his harem by diplomatic marriages:

11:1 But king Solomon loved many strange women, together with the daughter of Pharaoh, women of the Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Zidonians, *and* Hittites; 2 Of the nations *concerning* which the LORD said unto the children of Israel, Ye shall not go in to them, neither shall they come in unto you: *for* surely they will turn away your heart after their gods: Solomon clave unto these in love. 3 And he had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines: and his wives turned away his heart. 4 For it came to pass, when Solomon was old, *that* his wives turned away his heart after other gods: and his heart was not perfect with the LORD his God, as *was* the heart of David his father. 5 For Solomon went after Ashtoreth the goddess of the Zidonians, and after Milcom the abomination of the Ammonites. 6 And Solomon did evil in the sight of the LORD, and went not fully after the LORD, as *did* David his father. 7 Then did Solomon build an high place for Chemosh, the abomination of Moab, in the hill that *is* before Jerusalem, and for Molech, the abomination of the children of Ammon. 8 And likewise did he for all his strange wives, which burnt incense and sacrificed unto their gods.

In spite of clear warnings from Moses in Deuteronomy 6 and 17, the same Three Choices that our first parents failed in the Garden of Eden not only tripped up Israel in the wilderness, but led to the downfall of the Israelite monarchy.

¹⁸ The Hebrew word used here is probably a reference to a place rather than to a material.

6 Tyre and her King

A striking portion of Ezekiel is addressed to two rulers of the city-state of Tyrus (or Tyre): the prince (28:1-10) and the king (28:11-19). These are not two levels of the human administration. The prince of Tyre has divine ambitions, but the Lord makes clear that he is only human:

Eze 28:2 Son of man, say unto the prince of Tyrus, Thus saith the Lord GOD; Because thine heart *is* lifted up, and thou hast said, I *am* a God, I sit *in* the seat of God, in the midst of the seas; **yet thou art a man, and not God**, though thou set thine heart as the heart of God:

But the description of the king of Tyre is very different.

Eze 28:11 Moreover the word of the LORD came unto me, saying, 12 Son of man, take up a lamentation upon the king of Tyrus, and say unto him, Thus saith the Lord GOD; Thou sealest up the sum, full of wisdom, and perfect in beauty. 13 Thou hast been in Eden the garden of God; every precious stone *was* thy covering, the sardius, topaz, and the diamond, the beryl, the onyx, and the jasper, the sapphire, the emerald, and the carbuncle, and gold: the workmanship of thy tabrets and of thy pipes was prepared in thee in the day that thou wast created. 14 **Thou art the anointed cherub that covereth**; and I have set thee *so*: thou wast upon the holy mountain of God; thou hast walked up and down in the midst of the stones of fire. 15 Thou *wast* perfect in thy ways from the day that thou wast created, till iniquity was found in thee.

He is called a “cherub” or angel (v. 14), and was “in Eden the garden of God” (v. 13). It is likely that “the king of Tyre” is an angel who directs the earthly kingdom of Tyre, and in fact the one we know as Satan. Daniel, an older contemporary of Ezekiel, also received revelation about angelic forces associated with earthly kingdoms, in his case, Persia, Greece, and Israel (the archangel Michael) (Dan 10:20-21).

Ezekiel’s description of the angelic King of Tyre culminates in a triple condemnation, each focusing on a different feature of his demonic influence over the people of Tyre. Each condemnation states what the angel has done, and what God will do in response. Table 1 shows the structure. By now, we will not be surprised to find that these include each of the Three

16 By the multitude of thy merchandise they have filled the midst of thee with violence, and thou hast sinned:	therefore I will cast thee as profane out of the mountain of God: and I will destroy thee, O covering cherub, from the midst of the stones of fire.
17 Thine heart was lifted up because of thy beauty, thou hast corrupted thy wisdom by reason of thy brightness:	I will cast thee to the ground, I will lay thee before kings, that they may behold thee.
18 Thou hast defiled thy sanctuaries by the multitude of thine iniquities, by the iniquity of thy traffick;	therefore will I bring forth a fire from the midst of thee, it shall devour thee, and I will bring thee to ashes upon the earth in the sight of all them that behold thee.

Table 1: The three sins of the King of Tyre in Ezekiel 28

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Choices. In corrupting Tyre and turning it away from the true God, he leverages the same innate human drives that seduced our first parents in Eden.

In the previous chapter, Ezekiel delivers a lament against Tyre, which focuses on her prominence in commerce:

Eze 27:1 The word of the LORD came again unto me, saying, 2 Now, thou son of man, take up a lamentation for Tyrus; 3 And say unto Tyrus, O thou that art situate at the entry of the sea, *which art* a merchant of the people for many isles, Thus saith the Lord GOD; O Tyrus, thou hast said, I *am* of perfect beauty.

The entire chapter goes on to describe the many products in which the people of Tyre dominated the trade of the ancient world. This devotion to trade is “the multitude of thy merchandise” reflected in the first of the three sins:

28:16 By the multitude of thy merchandise they have filled the midst of thee with violence, and thou hast sinned:

As often in human experience, this focus on possessions and wealth led Tyre to violence and sin. Under Satan’s influence, she did not love the Lord with all of her abundance, but chose to yield to the lust of the eyes.

The wealth amassed by the city made her beautiful, and she knew it. The description of her trade in 27:2 includes her boast, “I am of perfect beauty.” The second condemnation focuses on the pride that developed from her wealth:

28:17 Thine heart was lifted up because of thy beauty, thou hast corrupted thy wisdom by reason of thy brightness:

Recall from Deut 6:4-5 that a heart that is lifted up is an expression of pride. Satan certainly did not lead Tyre to love the Lord with all of her heart, but focused her attention on her own importance. She fell victim to the pride of life.

The third condemnation of Tyre, under Satan’s influence, focuses on her religious practices:

28:18 Thou hast defiled thy sanctuaries by the multitude of thine iniquities, by the iniquity of thy traffick;

Phoenician religion was a fertility cult. Its mythology describes explicit sexual interactions among its deities, the idols that have been excavated are “anatomically correct,” and sacred prostitution was a common practice in its temples.

Like her pride, Tyre’s depraved religion was driven by her trade, “the iniquity of thy traffick,” which included slavery:

Eze 27:13 Javan, Tubal, and Meshech, they *were* thy merchants: they traded **the persons of men** and vessels of brass in thy market.

“Men” here is the generic term for people, and includes females as well as males. The people of Tyre did not love the Lord with all of their soul, their life force. Instead, under the influence of

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Satan, the King of Tyre, they chose sensual gratification and devoted themselves to the lust of the flesh.

Ezekiel's analysis of Tyre in terms of the Three Choices reminds us that this pattern is not specific to Israel. It first manifested itself with Eve in the Garden of Eden, before the nations were dispersed, and all of her descendants face its pressures.

7 Matthew 13 The Parable of the Sower

All three of the synoptic gospels record a parable that the Lord told about a sower who scatters his seed over four different kinds of ground (Matt 13:3-9, 18-23;¹⁹ Mark 4:2-20; Luke 8:5-15). The Lord explains to his disciples that this parable illustrates different responses when people hear the good news of the kingdom preached to them, ranging from apathy to fruitfulness. Only one of the four kinds of soil yields the fruit that the sower is seeking.

This parable is widely known. Perhaps less familiar is the insight that each of the unsuccessful soils reflects a failure in one of the Three Choices.

The story would be familiar to people living in a primitive agricultural society.

Mat 13:3 Behold, a sower went forth to sow; 4 And when he sowed, some *seeds* fell by the way side, and the fowls came and devoured them up: 5 Some fell upon stony places, where they had not much earth: and forthwith they sprung up, because they had no deepness of earth: 6 And when the sun was up, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away. 7 And some fell among thorns; and the thorns sprung up, and choked them: 8 But other fell into good ground, and brought forth fruit, some an hundredfold, some sixtyfold, some thirtyfold. 9 Who hath ears to hear, let him hear.

Sowing refers to scattering seed broadly over the field. We plant some plants (trees, for instance) more precisely, selecting the spot, digging a hole, putting in the seed, and covering it back up. But for grains, the usual approach is to scatter the seed, and the farmer doesn't control exactly where the seed falls.

The seed may fall in four places, ordered from least productive to most productive. In each case, the Lord describes (Table 2)

1. the *location* where the seed falls,
2. the *threat* to which it is exposed there (except in the last case),
3. its subsequent *growth* (except in the first case).

Matt 13:	4	5-6	7	8
Location	Beside the road	Stony places	Among thorns	Good ground
Threat	Birds	Sun	Thorns	(none)
Growth	(none)	Withered	Choked	Bear fruit

Table 2: Characteristics of the Four Soils

The interpretation of the parable is not obvious, even to the disciples. They ask him to explain it, and in vv. 18-19, he does. This explanation repeatedly brings our attention to the *Shema* of Deut 6:4-5, repeating the word “hear” in vv. 18, 19, 20, 22, and 23.

18 Hear ye therefore the parable of the sower. 19 ... the word of the kingdom,--People sometimes call the parable “the parable of the soils,” but the Lord gives it its proper name, “the parable of the sower.” He focuses our attention on the sower, who is sowing “the word of the

¹⁹ A detailed study of the parable in Matthew is available at <http://www.cyber-chapel.org/sermons/matt/notes/Matt13.pdf>.

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kingdom.”

The emphasis is on preaching, not teaching—on broadcasting the word broadly to those who have not heard, not giving in-depth instruction to those who are already committed. In fact, long before the days of radio and television, the word “broadcast” referred to the sowing of seed. The Lord intends that his servants should sow his word broadly, not just present it in a focused way to a selected few.

The purpose of the parable, revealed in the interpretation, is telling those who sow what to expect in their ministry. We are not to be discouraged because of lack of response. The field in which we labor is beset by birds, stones, and thorns, and we are to expect this full range of responses. Each of these responses describes a different kind of hearing, a different level of response to the *Shema* (Table 3). And because 1 John 2:16 reflects the same Three Choices as the *Shema*, each of the responses reflects that triad as well.

Deut 6:5	1 John 2:16	Matt 13:18-12
Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with	All that is in the world	
All thine heart	Pride of life	Wayside: 19 that which was sown in his heart
All thy soul / life	Lust of the flesh	Stony: 21 offended by tribulation or persecution
All thy strength / abundance	Lust of the eyes	Thorns: 22 care of this world, deceitfulness of riches

Table 3: The Shema, the World, and the Soils

19 When any one heareth the word of the kingdom, and understandeth it not, then cometh the wicked one, and catcheth away that which was sown in his heart. This is he which received seed by the way side.--The seed that lands by the side of the road is eaten by birds. Our Lord explains that the birds correspond to “the wicked one,” who seeks to snatch away “the word of the kingdom” from those who hear.²⁰

The location from which the seed is snatched is “his heart.” The person represented by the wayside is somebody to whose heart “the wicked one” has access. The *Shema* commands us to love the Lord our God with all of our heart. If we love God with all of our heart, the wicked one has no access. The spiritual disaster experienced by those by the wayside results from the waywardness of their heart.

The Lord says that the wicked one snatches away the seed, but the parable mentions many “birds.” Throughout the gospels, the Pharisees try to dissuade one another from believing on Jesus. In 12:24, they rationalize his success in casting out demons by suggesting he is doing it by the power of Satan. In John 7:42-46, they criticize first the temple guard, then Nicodemus, for hints of sympathy with him. Satan often uses mockery to try to dissuade us. If we choose to yield to social pressure, John would say that we have yielded to “the pride of life,” the desire to have others think well of us. As we have seen, the heart is the seat of pride, and we fall into this sin

²⁰ The plurality of the birds may reflect the Pharisees, who repeatedly try to turn one another away from the truth: 12:24; John 7:46-52.

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when we do not love the Lord with all our heart.

20 But he that received the seed into stony places, the same is he that heareth the word, and anon with joy receiveth it; 21 Yet hath he not root in himself, but dureth for a while: for when tribulation or persecution ariseth because of the word, by and by he is offended.--The seed in the stony place springs up, but is withered by the sun. The Lord explains the sun as corresponding to “tribulation or persecution.”

Our Savior warns of the effect of persecution later, in the Olivet Discourse:

Mat 24:9 Then shall they deliver you up to be afflicted, and shall kill you: and ye shall be hated of all nations for my name's sake. 10 And then shall many be offended, and shall betray one another, and shall hate one another. 11 And many false prophets shall rise, and shall deceive many. 12 And because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold. 13 But he that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved.²¹

Believers will suffer tribulation and persecution (John 16:33; Acts 14:22). If a person loves worldly comfort more than he loves the Lord, he will succumb. We see an example of this in Paul's history, in 2 Timothy, written during his second imprisonment, which ended in his execution.

2Ti 4:16 At my first answer no man stood with me, but all *men* forsook me: *I pray God* that it may not be laid to their charge. 17 Notwithstanding the Lord stood with me, and strengthened me; that by me the preaching might be fully known, and *that* all the Gentiles might hear: and I was delivered out of the mouth of the lion.

There was a time when Paul could invoke his Roman citizenship for protection against persecution. But later Rome turned hostile to Paul. When that happened, many believers feared for their own well-being, and refused to be associated with him.²²

While the sun withers the seed on rocky soil, it is necessary for the growth and fruitfulness of the seed on good soil. Suffering in the life of the true believer brings strength and additional fruit. Our Lord “learned obedience by the things which he suffered,” Heb 5:8, and so may we.

Someone who fails because of “tribulation and persecution” chooses physical comfort over serving the Lord. Recall that the Hebrew word for our physical life is the “soul” in Deut 6:5. If we love the Lord with all of our soul, physical discomfort will not turn us aside. If God owns my entire life, I trust him to bring me joy or sorrow, pleasure or pain, as he sees fit, and serve him regardless. But if I do not love him with all of my soul, physical discomfort can turn me aside.²³

21 People may debate the timing of “the great tribulation,” but both our Lord (John 16:33) and his apostles (Acts 14:22) leave no question that believers now must be prepared to endure tribulation for the sake of the kingdom.

22 Phygellus and Hermogenes in 1:15 may be specific examples of this tendency, though they are in Asia and not in Rome.

23 The link with the soul may be involved in the expression, “he hath not root in himself.” If the Lord originally gave the parable and its interpretation in Hebrew, the idiom for “in himself” that he would have used is the expression בנפשו, literally “in his soul,” which is built on the word נפש, Strong's H5315, discussed in connection with Deut 6:4-5. The KJV in fact translates בנפשו as “by himself” in Jer 51:14 and Amos 6:8.

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Again, we can understand the dynamic in terms of 1 John 2:16. This time, it is the lust of the flesh, the desire for personal comfort, that gets in the way of the free growth of the seed.

22 He also that received seed among the thorns is he that heareth the word; and the care of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, choke the word, and he becometh unfruitful.--On the third soil, the seed must compete with other, more vigorous plants that crowd it out. The Lord interprets these weeds of worldly cares and the desire for riches. The result is that the plant never produces fruit. We have an example of this behavior in Demas, of whom Paul says,

2Ti 4:10 For Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world,

The first two kinds of bad soil correspond to failure to obey the *Shema*. How about the third? The last part of the *Shema* commands us to love the Lord our God with all of our abundance. The person who is like the thorny soil is led astray by “the deceitfulness of riches.” Or in terms of 1 John 2:16, he chooses to follow “the lust of the eyes.” He values things more than he loves the Lord.

23 But he that received seed into the good ground is he that heareth the word, and understandeth it; which also beareth fruit, and bringeth forth, some an hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.--But there is good soil, in which the seed is neither caught away by the birds, nor stunted by rocks, nor choked by thorns. Like our Lord in the wilderness, and unlike Eve in the garden, they do not succumb to the lust of the flesh, or the lust of the eyes, or the pride of life. They follow Moses’ exhortation: they truly hear the Word of God, and choose to love him with all of their heart, and all of their soul, and all of their abundance. The result is that the Word of the Kingdom takes firm root and, watered by the Spirit, brings forth a prolific harvest.

8 Training of the Disciples, Matt 19-20a

Matthew’s account of the Lord’s final journey from Capernaum toward Jerusalem (19:1-20:16) is a carefully marked unit.²⁴ It begins with the notice that he is leaving Jerusalem:

19:1 And it came to pass, *that* when Jesus had finished these sayings, he departed from Galilee, and came into the coasts of Judaea beyond Jordan;

Its end is marked with 20:17-19, which introduces the next section,

Mat 20:17 And Jesus going up to Jerusalem took the twelve disciples apart in the way, and said unto them, 18 Behold, we go up to Jerusalem; and the Son of man shall be betrayed unto the chief priests and unto the scribes, and they shall condemn him to death, 19 And shall deliver him to the Gentiles to mock, and to scourge, and to crucify *him*: and the third day he shall rise again.

This is the third of four announcements of his passion (16:21-21; 17:22-23; 20:17-19; 26:1-2), announcements that outline the structure of the last third of the book.

Aside from a brief notice (19:2) that he continues to be thronged by multitudes seeking healing, this well-delineated section consists of three episodes with highly parallel content (Table 4). In each case, someone steps forth from the multitude and engages the Lord on a subject. In each case, the Lord engages, not only the petitioner, but also the disciples, providing them

Choice	Soul: Lust of Flesh	Heart: Pride of Life	Abundance: Lust of Eyes
Outsiders	Pharisees	Children	Young man
Disciples	10-12	13-14	19:23-20:15
Divine enabling	19:11 But he said unto them, All <i>men</i> cannot receive this saying, save <i>they</i> to whom it is given .	19:13 Then were there brought unto him little children ... 18:3 Except ye be converted , and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.	19:26 But Jesus beheld <i>them</i> , and said unto them, With men this is impossible ; but with God all things are possible.

Table 4: Comparing the Episodes Along the Way

with instruction that will be important for their future life and ministry. Each of these episodes instructs them on one of the Three Choices.

Once the Lord reaches Jerusalem, his interactions focus on the temple hierarchy, and his conversations with the disciples are devoted mostly to his death and subsequent return. In this final journey, he gives them instruction that will guide them in their life and ministry between his ascension and his return. Now that we have seen how pervasive the Three Choices are throughout the Bible, and how central they are to living a victorious Christian life, we are not

24 For a thorough analysis of the structure of Matthew, see my studies on the book, available as both pdf and mp3 at <http://www.cyber-chapel.org/sermons/matt/index.html>.

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surprised that these three final lessons are devoted to the Three Choices.²⁵

19:3-12, Divorce and Remarriage: Lust of the Flesh

The first episode begins with a challenge from the Pharisees concerning divorce and remarriage.

19:3 The Pharisees also came unto him, tempting him, and saying unto him, Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause?

In the culture of our Lord's day, divorce and remarriage were common and widely accepted, especially among the upper classes. In particular, Herod Antipas, who was the Roman puppet king over Galilee and the east bank of the Jordan river, divorced his wife so that he could marry Herodias. To complete this marriage, Herodias first had to divorce Herod's brother Philip. John the Baptist spoke out boldly about this wickedness, and Herodias manipulated her husband into having him put to death (Matt 14:1-12). Now the Lord is passing through Herod's territory east of the Jordan (19:1, "the coasts of Judaea beyond Jordan"), and it is likely that the Pharisees are trying to lure the Lord into a strong statement on the subject in the hopes that he will meet the same end as John.

In spite of the potential political risk, The Lord does not hesitate to make his position clear, denying any excuse for divorce:

Mat 19:4 And he answered and said unto them, Have ye not read, that he which made *them* at the beginning made them male and female, 5 And said, For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh? 6 Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.

His disciples are shocked at his extreme position. He reminds them that meeting God's standard requires God's enabling.

Mat 19:10 His disciples say unto him, If the case of the man be so with *his* wife, it is not good to marry. 11 But he said unto them, All *men* cannot receive this saying, save *they* to whom it is given. 12 For there are some eunuchs, which were so born from *their* mother's womb: and there are some eunuchs, which were made eunuchs of men: and there be eunuchs, which have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake. He that is able to receive *it*, let him receive *it*.

I have discussed this conversation in great detail elsewhere.²⁶ For our purposes, it is sufficient to note that this first episode focuses on the lust of the flesh. Of the innate drives that keep our biological machinery running, the drive to reproduce is one of the strongest, and one that very easily gets out of control. If we love the Lord with all of our life force, we will satisfy this drive within the guidelines that God has provided in his word. All of Scripture consistently teaches that

25 In the will of the Lord, a more detailed exposition of this section will be available at <http://www.cyber-chapel.org/sermons/matt/notes/Matt1920a.pdf>.

26 H.V.D. Parunak, *Except for Fornication* (Energion, 2011), Chapter 4.

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changing wives is not within those guidelines.²⁷ The Lord hates putting away (Mal 2:16).

19:13-15, Blessing the Children: Pride of Life

The second episode along the road to Jerusalem is the shortest of the three.

19:13 Then were there brought unto him little children, that he should put *his* hands on them, and pray: and the disciples rebuked them. 14 But Jesus said, Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me: for of such is the kingdom of heaven. 15 And he laid *his* hands on them, and departed thence.

The significance of this episode becomes clear when we recall the Lord's last major instruction to the disciples before leaving Galilee. We find the account in Matthew 18. It begins with a question by the disciples:

18:1 At the same time came the disciples unto Jesus, saying, Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?

The disciples are preoccupied with prestige. Even in the face of his repeated reminders of his coming humiliation, they repeatedly show their desire for prominence in the kingdom.

- After the Lord first announces his passion (16:21), Peter rebukes the Lord for even thinking that he would be killed. Peter cannot conceive that someone as important as God's promised king would allow himself to be humbled in this way.
- After the second announcement (17:22-23), we hear the disciples' question in 18:1.
- After the third announcement (20:17-19), the mother of James and John tries to negotiate special privileges for her sons in the coming kingdom:

20:20 Then came to him the mother of Zebedee's children with her sons, worshipping *him*, and desiring a certain thing of him. 21 And he said unto her, What wilt thou? She saith unto him, Grant that these my two sons may sit, the one on thy right hand, and the other on the left, in thy kingdom.

Luke tells us that even at the last supper, the disciples were arguing over their relative status (Luk 22:24).

In Matthew 18, the Lord responds to the disciples' question about who would be greatest by using a child as an object lesson.

18:2 And Jesus called a little child unto him, and set him in the midst of them, 3 And said, Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. 4 Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as

²⁷ The book *Except for Fornication* shows that our Lord's teaching a) allows no exceptions and b) reaffirms, rather than revises, the teaching of Moses on this subject. The so-called "exception clause" in 19:9 does not justify divorce, but invokes the Mosaic penalty of capital punishment as outlined in Deuteronomy 22. See the book for more details.

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this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

Entry into the kingdom requires a conversion, a radical process of change, that results in a person becoming like a little child, a process that our Lord earlier described to Nicodemus as being “born again” (John 3).

The characteristic of the “little child” that the Lord requires, according to 18:4, is humility. The true believer recognizes that spiritually he is a little child. In the physical domain, a little child does not seek preeminence over others, but recognizes his dependence on more mature people. The Scriptures teach that believers should have the same attitude of humility and dependence.

For example, a young child cannot provide his own food, but hungers for nourishment. The Scriptures teach,

1Pe 2:1 Wherefore laying aside all malice, and all guile, and hypocrisies, and envies, and all evil speakings, 2 As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby:

Notice the contrast that Peter makes. The believer’s hunger for the word of God is in direct contrast with proud, dominant behavior.

As another example of the attitude of dependence and submission of a young child, consider how attached children are to their parents, and how they naturally look to more mature people for help, guidance, and security. Even so, Christians are to show an attitude of respect and deference to those who are more mature in the faith:

1Th 5:12 And we beseech you, brethren, to know them which labour among you, and are over you in the Lord, and admonish you; 13 And to esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake. *And* be at peace among yourselves.

Heb 13:17 Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that *is* unprofitable for you.

1Pe 5:5 Likewise, ye younger, submit yourselves unto the elder. Yea, all *of you* be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble.

In the church of Jesus Christ, leadership is not to be demanded by the proud or imposed by the powerful. Rather, it is elicited by the needs of the little children, and provided with loving patience by those with more experience in the faith.

Instead of asking the Lord to give one of them preference over the others, the disciples should have been manifesting the humility of a child. Throughout the second part of Matthew 18 (18:5-14), the Lord emphasizes the importance of the “little children” or “little ones” in the church. He is not making statements about the spiritual state of infants, for he emphasizes that these little ones believe in him (18:6). They have been converted, and now they should be characterized by humility and submission to one another, not a proud ambition to be “the greatest in the kingdom

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of heaven.”

In spite of this instruction, the disciples still seek after greatness. James and John send their mother to ask places of privilege for them, and the disciples at the Last Supper argue over who will be first. Their conduct in 19:13 reflects same persistent pride. Even after he instructs them in Matthew 18 about the importance of “little children,” they view the Lord as too important to be bothered with such people, and place themselves in the position of executive secretaries

protecting his precious calendar from trivial intrusions. They continue to choose the pride of life, a focus on the importance of self that indicates that their heart is not devoted entirely to loving the Lord, but continues to seek its own exaltation. The Lord gently rebukes them, reminding them of what he has already said in his longer exhortation in Matthew 18 (Table 5).

18:3 Except ye be converted, and become as little children , ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven .	19:14 Suffer little children , and forbid them not, to come unto me: for of such is the kingdom of heaven .
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Table 5: Comparison of 18:3 and 19:14

In both passages, he uses a child as the example, emphasizes that they need to be like children, and tells them that what is at stake is their participation in the kingdom of heaven.

The imagery that our Lord uses to explain the need for humility, the little child, has an important implication. Physically, children do not decide to be born. Their birth is something determined by their parents, and they can claim no credit for it. In Matt 19:13, the children did not come on their own, but were brought by others. Spiritual birth is no different. What is needed is not that we convert (on our initiative and by our strength), but that we be converted (Matt 18:3). The new birth results from a moving of God’s Spirit that we cannot understand (John 3:8; compare Eccl 11:5). Overcoming the pride of life, like overcoming the lust of the flesh, requires a gift of God.

19:16-20:15, A Rich Young Man: Lust of the Eyes

The third episode that Matthew records as the Lord travels south with his disciples arises from the question of a young man who is concerned about his spiritual destiny.

19:16 And, behold, one came and said unto him, Good Master, what good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life?

The Lord responds by outlining the requirements of the second half of the ten commandments, the ones that specify our duty to other people:

19:17 if thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments. 18 He saith unto him, Which? Jesus said, Thou shalt do no murder, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, 19 Honour thy father and *thy* mother: and, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.

The young man claims to have observed these scrupulously, and yet is still not at peace. He senses that something is missing.

Mat 19:20 The young man saith unto him, All these things have I kept from my youth

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up: what lack I yet?

The Lord's first answer (vv. 17-19) is striking, particularly in light of what Matthew later records about his comments on the law in chapter 22.

Mat 22:35 Then one of them, *which was* a lawyer, asked *him a question*, tempting him, and saying, 36 Master, *which is* the great commandment in the law? 37 Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. 38 This is the first and great commandment. 39 And the second *is* like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. 40 On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.

In this later interview, the Lord summarizes the ten commandments using two other texts from the law. He sums up the first four commandments, dealing with our duty to the Lord, with Deut 6:5, calling it “the first and great commandment” (Matt 22:37).²⁸ It is strange that in telling the young man what God expects, he summarizes the secondary theme of the law, but omits the primary one. But our Savior “knew all *men*, and needed not that any should testify of man: for he knew what was in man” (John 2:24-25). He knows from the outset what the young man is missing. He knows that the young man is scrupulous in his duty toward his neighbor, so he begins with those commandments. When the young man acknowledges that something is missing in his life, the Lord directs his attention to the commandments that are missing in vv. 17-19:

Mat 19:21 Jesus said unto him, If thou wilt be perfect, go *and* sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come *and* follow me. 22 But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful: for he had great possessions.

According to Matt 22:37, the first four commandments of the law are summarized in Deut 6:5, the demand that we love the Lord with all of our heart, life force, and abundance. The Lord puts his finger on the third choice. The young man loves his wealth more than he loves God. He will not surrender his abundance to serve the Lord. He is undone by the lust of the eyes.

As in each of the other two episodes, the Lord concludes by making the point clear for his disciples.

Mat 19:23 Then said Jesus unto his disciples, Verily I say unto you, That a rich man shall hardly enter into the kingdom of heaven. 24 And again I say unto you, It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God. 25 When his disciples heard *it*, they were exceedingly amazed, saying, Who then can be saved? 26 But Jesus beheld *them*, and said unto them, With men this is impossible; but with God all things are possible.

In the first episode, the Lord emphasized the need for a divine gift to overcome the lust of the

²⁸ The wording in Matt 22:37 follows the Greek translation of the day, differing in some details from the Hebrew text.

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flesh and love God with all of one's life force. The imagery of conversion and new birth implicit in the second episode shows that overcoming the pride of life and loving the Lord with all of our heart is also the work of God, and now he emphasizes that the same principle is true of the lust of the eyes. We can only love God with all of our abundance in the strength that he gives us.

9 Responding to the Three Choices

Success in warfare requires two kinds of knowledge. We must know our enemy: his strengths, his strategies, how he is likely to attack, and where he is weak. And we must know ourselves, including our resources and our vulnerabilities. These two kinds of knowledge are critical whether we are talking about physical war or spiritual war.

The New Testament reminds us of these two classes of knowledge. Concerning our adversary, we read,

2Co 2:10 To whom ye forgive any thing, I *forgive* also: for if I forgave any thing, to whom I forgave *it*, for your sakes *forgave I it* in the person of Christ; 11 Lest Satan should get an advantage of us: for **we are not ignorant of his devices.**

Paul is writing to prepare the Corinthians for an approaching visit. They have faced some serious challenges in managing sin within the assembly, and he has rebuked them in previous correspondence. But he knows that Satan can use such tensions to undermine the work of Christ, and guided by this knowledge, he urges upon them a spirit of forgiveness.

Concerning knowledge of ourselves, we read of our Savior,

Joh 2:23 Now when he was in Jerusalem at the passover, in the feast *day*, many believed in his name, when they saw the miracles which he did. 24 But Jesus did not commit himself unto them, because he knew all *men*, 25 And needed not that any should testify of man: for **he knew what was in man.**

During his first visit to Jerusalem, as throughout his ministry, people were drawn to him because of his miracles and the clear authority of his teaching. He could have mobilized a movement to set himself up as king. But he knows the inner motives of people's hearts, their vulnerabilities to sin, and refuses to yield to a superficial popularity.

In teaching us about the Three Choices, God has given us knowledge both of ourselves and of our adversary.

Concerning ourselves, he has revealed the three fundamental drivers of all human beings: a sense of self that can lead to pride, biological urges that maintain physical life but can be perverted to self-gratification, and an appreciation of beauty that can become greed. These three drivers are common to all the children of Adam and Eve. If we recognize them, we can deliberately present each of them to the Lord, resolving to use them only and completely in love and service to him.

Because these three drivers are so central to our being, they also form the main framework of Satan's attacks against us. Over and over, starting in the Garden of Eden, throughout the history of Israel and her neighbors, and down to our Lord's temptation, Satan seeks to lead us to make the wrong decision in each of the Three Choices. Recognizing these three principles will enable us to prepare scriptural defenses for the ones to which we are individually vulnerable, and be prepared to stand against the wiles of the Devil.