

Jesus Decided to Die • Matthew 29:39-46

We arrived at the airport early. My driver pulled into a parking place instead of dropping me off at the front of the terminal. He turned off the key. His body language told me he wanted to talk. And talk he did! His story left me with a heavy heart for this friend and his situation. His young adult son had taken up with the wrong crowd in a city halfway across the country. An encounter in an apartment building with several other young adults resulted in shots being fired. The victim died. Several were arrested; all were charged with first-degree murder, his son included. The trial was to begin the next week. He and his wife were taking time off to drive over a thousand miles to sit in the courtroom each day as their son was tried for murder in a state with capital punishment. I didn't know what to say. I'm not sure I said anything.

In Hebrews 4:15 we are told that Jesus is not someone who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses because he has been tempted in every way, just as we are, yet he was without sin. It's not that Jesus faced every situation identically as we do, but in his life Jesus dealt with every type of trial or temptation. He even faced capital punishment. Let's look at Matthew 26:39-46. The setting was the Garden of Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives just east of the old city of Jerusalem. It was the eve of Jesus' crucifixion:

Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will."

Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. "Could you men not keep watch with me for one hour?" he asked Peter. "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak."

He went away a second time and prayed, "My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink

it, may your will be done."

When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. So he left them and went away once more and prayed the third time, saying the same thing.

Then he returned to the disciples and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and resting? Look, the hour is near, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise, let us go! Here comes my betrayer!"

Jesus made his toughest decision that night in that garden. That decision of Jesus the night before he was crucified is in a league all by itself. By comparison, most of us will never have to make a decision in that league. When we talk

about death we discuss *when* we will die and *how*, but we never have a discussion about *if* we will die. For us death is a given; we all expect it. We seek to delay it, but when it comes we desire it to be pleasant and comfortable.

For Jesus it was not only a matter of *when* and *how*, it was also a matter of *if* he would die because while he was fully human he was also fully God. And as God, he was life. He did not have to die ever. He could have lived forever. He could have skipped death.

We know what Jesus decided. He decided to die. And he *did* die—by crucifixion. We will not talk much about the final decision that was made or how it was implemented. Let's consider, instead, the process through which Jesus went in making this very tough decision.

Jesus' biggest decision was whether or not he wanted to do what God the Father wanted him to do. It was a clash of very strong wills. God the Father said, "I want you to die." And Jesus clearly said, "I don't want to die." So the difference could not have been greater or more important. It was literally a matter of life and death.

The most important decision Jesus made was

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to go along with what the Father wanted, whether Jesus liked it or not. He chose to believe that God's choice was superior to his even if it ran counter to his deepest emotions. He chose to have faith that God had the greatest good in mind for him and for everyone else, even if that included a terrible death. He chose to submit to the will of God. In Jesus' own words he said, "*My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.*"

He did it! He submitted to what God ordered. But a few minutes later he was back in the same place on his knees negotiating the same deal again, almost word for word, saying, "Father, I know that's what you want, but couldn't there be a better way. You are God. You can manage all the circumstances. Find a way out for me." Again his Father said, "No." Again Jesus made this terribly difficult decision saying, "All right then, not what I want but what you want."

It was finished. Twice decided. He walked back to his friends. The deal was done. He would go through with it—except, he went back again and knelt and prayed and pleaded for his life. Again he said, "Father, there has to be another way. I don't want to do this. I don't want to die. I want to live." It took Jesus three times to make the decision stick. It may have taken more than that, but there are only three times that are recorded for us.

The greatest part of the decision was the conviction that God the Father was right and that he would submit to that choice whether he liked it or not. But Jesus was human—he was as we are. And whenever we make our important decisions of life it rarely, if ever, comes down to a single element or factor. Our decisions are complex because we are complex.

There were multiple reasons why Jesus made the decision to die. Among them was his love for others. Earlier in his biography we find the profound words he spoke to his followers—words that are frequently quoted in other literature—when Jesus said, "*Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.*" It is the ultimate definition of love.

Amil Durkhine, the father of modern sociol-

ogy, defined this as altruistic suicide—giving your life for the love or benefit of someone else. A soldier with his comrades in the heat of battle sees a live grenade land near them. He throws his body over the grenade giving his life to save the lives of his friends. A husband facing an assailant steps in front of his wife and takes the bullet as the gun is fired. He dies; she lives. During a famine or drought a mother gives her water and food so that her child can survive even though it costs her own life.

Applied to Jesus it was the ultimate example. He had such love for others that he died for them. But, more correctly, he died for us! This is not impersonal or distant. This is not ancient history. This is about us—our generation—because Jesus included us in his death on the cross.

Through the years I have watched profound changes in people's lives as they switch their use of pronouns. Before they may have spoken with great passion in theory about all Jesus did for others but they have that golden moment when they realize it is a personal matter, that if no one else had ever lived Jesus would have made that decision just for them—and "they" becomes "me". He would have died just for me!

Every one of us should feel really loved. Even if there are times when we feel unloved or unappreciated by others let us never forget that Jesus chose to die for us because he loved us so much: "*Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.*"

A third reason for Jesus' decision to die was that he values human life. Jesus sees every human being as a special creation made in God's image. God created us to live. It was supposed to be that way. Jesus wanted every member of God's human race to live, not die. The prospect of spending forever in eternal death distanced from God was so repugnant to him that it played into the decision he made to submit to the Father's will and go ahead with this crucifixion. He valued human life because it was in God's image and was intended to last forever.

There is great debate in our world about the value of life. Each day hundreds of abortions are performed in the United States. Murders. Abuse.

People are devalued because of their race, gender or age. We decide that some lives are more valuable than others.

Jesus' view was very different. He considered each individual to be more valuable than any possession they could be compared to. He chose to die so his life could be transplanted into us in order that we could become Christians and have Jesus living inside of us. When you put all of this together you begin to understand that Jesus' decision to die was a combination of submission to the Father, love for others and his value of life.

Let's consider how we can make our decisions by the principles Jesus used. First, let's choose from our past what we consider to be the most difficult decision we have ever made. Not necessarily the most significant decision because there are some decisions that are monumental in our biographies that were very easy to make. So, what would you count as the one, two or maybe three toughest decisions of your life—past or present?

Keep these choices in mind as you consider the application of Jesus' principles to your decision. First of all, believe that God is right. That is not always easy to do, especially if our opinions differ significantly from what we know he would do. Yet, as Christians we must believe that God is wiser than we are, that he has information we do not have and that, even if his will seems to counter everything we would otherwise choose, he is right.

That may be very hard for most of us to do. What if God wants us to tell the truth, but telling the truth will cost the job we need very much because of the health benefits it provides for our family? What if God's will is that we break off a relationship with someone we really care for? What if God wants us to stop stealing but that means the partners in our small business will no longer direct clients to us and we could potentially be out of work?

Probably not a day goes by that we do not

differ with God in what we would choose. But as Christians we are convinced that God is right even if his choice is contrary to our own. While we may have to go through pain and problems now, ultimately God's great good is best.

Here's a way to test this. Look at your life and say, "Here are the choices I face. If I could have this come out any way I want, what would I choose?" Then ask God, "What would you like to have happen in this choice?" Be careful not to bend God to fit your will but honestly ask God what he wants. When the choice is clear, decide that you believe God is right even if his will is different from yours. Submit by telling God you'll do it his way. Mimic the words of Jesus who said, "Not my will, but yours be done."

In some cases the cost may be very high. An article in The Wall Street Journal told about the persecution and martyrdom of Christians in East and Northeast Africa. It cited examples from the

Sudan, Ethiopia, Egypt, Iran and Iraq. It told of an entire community of Christians in the Sudan who refused to give up their commitment to Jesus Christ. Soldiers under political orders came in and killed all but the pastor of the

group. The leader decided to let him live but gouged out his eyes as an example to others of what happens to those who believe in Jesus Christ. Those Christians submitted to the will of God, even at great personal cost.

Chances are slim that we will ever face anything quite so dramatic. For us the cost may be in a relationship or a job. It may mean changing our vocabulary so we no longer make racial jokes or putdowns. It may mean we comply with God in some comparatively small sacrifice.

The other morning I took my Bible and journal and went downstairs to the living room. I remembered that the newspaper was outside and I had to decide what I wanted to do. Did I want to spend time alone with God or did I want to read

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the newspaper? To be truthful, I wanted to read the newspaper. No doubt about it. I thought to myself, “Here’s another clash of wills. Am I going to do what I want or am I going to do what God wants me to do?” So, I sat down with my Bible and journal to read what God had to say and to talk to him. (By the way, at the end of the day I looked at the newspaper and there really wasn’t anything worthwhile in it, anyway!)

Whether the cost is as high as life itself or as trivial as reading the newspaper the principle is to submit to God’s will. Go along with what God wants whether it is easy or hard.

A third principle is that we are to value others. Give them the same value Jesus does. Each time Jesus looked at a person, including his enemies, he saw the likeness of God in them.

In our family we sometimes discuss how people resemble other people. Someone may look a whole lot like a brother or sister or parent or child. I have difficulty doing that. To me people don’t look that much alike. And when people see resemblances in people that aren’t even related I find that a stretch! But occasionally I look at someone and say, “Wow! You look a lot like your father (or mother).” I especially notice it in adult children of people I’ve been friends with for a long time. I feel I know them because I see in them the parent I know far better.

I believe that when Jesus looks at people he sees a striking resemblance to God. Now there are some people who try to blot out any similarity or resemblance, but Jesus can still see it. There are other people who are such saints that you can see God in them in an instant. To value the lives of others is to continually see the likeness of God in every person. So, when we make decisions about co-workers, neighbors, those on television, political candidates, controversial lawyers or convicted criminals we must value them for God’s sake.

A final principle is to keep on praying. Perhaps that’s the most practical of all, one that Jesus made time for in a busy schedule. He left his friends in order to pray. He wouldn’t make significant decisions until first he talked them through with God. So, when deciding if or whom

to marry, whether or not to quit your job, if you should enter a lawsuit or which cancer treatment to take set aside time to ask God what he wants you to do. And keep on praying until you have heard God’s will and are ready to do it.

In Germany a controversy arose over the cross of Jesus Christ. Based on separation of church and state, the German Federal High Court ruled that all crucifixes had to be removed from all public classrooms in Germany. In Bavaria, a southern province of Germany, it was estimated that 40,000 classrooms had crucifixes on the walls. The people of Bavaria refused to take down the crucifixes even if it meant Bavaria had to withdraw from the German Republic.

May the cross of Jesus Christ and what he did there be that important to us. Take the example of Jesus—his great decision to obey the Father enough to die the cross—and nail that example to the walls of our souls. Let no one take down the influence Jesus and his cross have on our lives and our decisions. Live like Jesus and decide like Jesus. Believe that God is always right. Submit to God’s will in all decisions. Value others in every relationship. And may we keep on praying until we align with the will of God and choose to follow him.

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