

FREEDOM IN CHRIST . . .

THOSE WHO DECIDE

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I. Introduction

Man is created in God's image. Thus, man is able to reason and make decisions. He may not like to make decisions, but he can't avoid it. Even if he decides not to decide – he makes a decision! Regardless of how hard he tries, he can't escape decision-making. It is an act of responsibility. We might try to shift the blame to someone else, but we are still responsible for our decisions. The case of Adam and Eve (Genesis 3) illustrates this well. They made a decision but when they realized it had backfired on them, they started looking for someone to blame. Adam blamed Eve who then blamed the snake. Not only are we responsible for our decisions, we have to live with their consequences. Some choices only affect us in this life. Others have an eternal effect. And, some decisions affect us both in this life and our eternal destiny (Acts 5:1-11).

II. Those Who Decided for Christ

As we go through life, we make important decisions. They include how and what kind of job we want, the education we seek, whom we marry, what kind of moral and ethical life we will live and what kind of parents we will be? All are important and impact the kind of life we live. As important as these are, they shrink in significance before the most important of all . . . ***“What will I do with Christ?”*** We can't shift the responsibility for our decision to someone else, nor can we refuse to make a decision. When we refuse to decide what to do with Christ, we decide against Him. The Bible gives examples of those who decided to follow Christ and those who did not. We will look at some who decided to follow Christ. As we look at their stories, look at the decisions they faced and their consequences.

A. Simon and Andrew

Mark 1:14-20 and John 1:40-42 give the account of Simon (Peter's original name) and Andrew, his brother, becoming Jesus' disciples. Simon and Andrew had a poor night fishing – they caught nothing. Jesus, walking along the shore of the Sea of Galilee, invites Himself into their boat. Jesus tells them to put back to sea and try again. They do so and immediately catch such a large school of fish that they are almost swamped. When they returned to land, Jesus commands them to follow Him. They were to leave their business and become His disciples (also, see Matthew

4:18-20 and Luke 5:10-11). Simon and Andrew had several decisions to make when Jesus first arrived. The first decision was whether to throw Him out of their boat or let Him stay? After deciding to let Him stay, they had to decide whether or not to obey His command to start fishing again? Their third decision in this story was whether or not to obey His command to follow Him and become His disciples?

Each decision they made to obey Jesus led to a greater commitment and a harder decision forced upon them. Their first decision of whether or not to throw Jesus off their boat was easy. They might have heard about Him and thought that His presence might be good for business. Also, they might have thought that He was just a sightseer who after looking over their boat, would be on His way. And, they had been fishing all night and could have been tired so they might have just tried to ignore Him. Whatever reason they had – they decided to let Jesus remain on their boat. Once they decided to let Jesus stay on their boat, they were faced with a second decision when He told them to go fishing again. They could have thought, “This fellow has a lot of nerve! First, He invites Himself onto our boat and now, He is telling us how to run our business!” They could have decided to go ahead and throw Him off the boat. They could have let Him remain and just ignore Him. They could have decided to do what He commanded them to do. We do not know why but for some reason, they decided to put their boat back into the water and try fishing again. Their final decision in this story was whether or not to answer Jesus’ call to discipleship. They could have either told Jesus, “No,” or they could have said, “Yes, but wait until we find someone else to handle our business,” or they could immediately go with Jesus. *They decided to follow Jesus immediately.* Luke 5:1-11 gives us some indication of why they made the decision to follow Jesus immediately. When Simon Peter saw the size of their catch of fish, he fell at Jesus’ feet and stated, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.” Peter knew that he was in the presence of someone who was out of the ordinary. Luke tells us that Peter and the other fishermen were amazed. They were afraid and in awe of what had happened. Only God’s prophets could know and do such a thing. So when Jesus commanded Peter and Andrew to follow Him, they knew that this Man was from God and therefore, they *must* obey Him.

What were the consequences of their decision to follow Jesus? Their lives were forever changed. Initially, the change was serving Jesus and learning from Him. Then, after Jesus’ ascension, they became Apostles, traveling the world to preach the Gospel of Christ. According to ancient church tradition, they ended their earthly lives as martyrs for the cause of Christ. From another angle, how many other simple, uneducated fishermen have gone down in history as great men? Not many. Most importantly, their *eternal* destiny is to live with God and Christ – forever!

B. Cornelius

Acts, Chapter 10, tells the story of Cornelius, a Roman centurion. Luke begins by telling us about some decisions that Cornelius had *already* made. First, he had decided to believe in God. This might sound strange to us but in the First Century, it was not. In those days, except for the Jews and a few Gentile converts, people worshiped idols. As a Roman citizen, it was Cornelius’ social and official obligation to believe in and worship the Roman gods. Somewhere, he learned about God and

made the decision that he would serve Him. These people were called “God-fearers.” Secondly, Cornelius had decided not only to believe in God but also to show his faith by praying and helping people in need. These early decisions in Cornelius’ life set the stage for decisions that faced him in this story.

The story is that of Cornelius’ conversion to Christianity. One day while he was praying, an angel appeared to him. He was told to send for Peter who would tell him what he needed to do in order to be saved. He sent for Peter, listened to the Gospel, and accepted it. Cornelius had had several decisions to make in this story. The first has to do with what the angel told him to do – send for Peter. We might think that this was not too hard a decision for Cornelius. Who would refuse to obey a command by an angel? Well, Cornelius had some prejudices to overcome. The Jews had told him that by believing in God and following the Law of Moses, he would be acceptable to God. Now, he finds out that they are wrong. Who IS right? Due to the impact that Christianity was making on the Jewish people, Cornelius probably knew about it. He was likely aware that the Jewish leaders considered it “heresy” and persecuted Christians. He decided to obey the angel and sent for Peter. The next decision Cornelius was whether or not to listen to Peter. He had gone to all the trouble of sending for Peter and had waited for days for him to arrive. So, it was an easy decision to make to *listen* to Peter. Cornelius’ decision to listen to Peter was not selfish in that he kept Peter to himself. Instead, he assembled his entire household to hear the Word of God.

The third decision Cornelius had to make was whether or not to accept the Gospel. The fact that the Holy Spirit fell upon Cornelius and his household while they were listening to Peter’s teaching indicates that they decided to accept the Gospel. The consequences of Cornelius’ decision to accept the Gospel did not only mean that he was saved – the story of his conversion is recorded for an example for all people for all time. In this story, Cornelius was not the only one who had to make decisions. Peter was faced with having to make several decisions. The first decision was whether or not to accept the invitation of Cornelius? God prepared Peter to accept Cornelius’ invitation by sending a vision to help Peter understand that ALL men – Jews and Gentiles – are acceptable to God and should become Christians. This was an extremely radical idea for Peter. Up until then, the Gospel had only been preached to Jews and Samaritans (half-Jews). Allowing a Gentile to become a Christian was unthinkable! This was the reason for Peter’s vision. Peter’s second decision was whether or not to baptize Cornelius and his family. God helped Peter decide when the Holy Spirit came upon Cornelius. In both decisions facing Peter, he could have *played it safe* and followed the Jewish argument that Christianity is for Jews only. Peter decided that if God had gone to the trouble of sending an angel to Cornelius, sending himself a vision, and then sending the Holy Spirit upon Cornelius – it must be God’s Will that a Gentle be allowed into the church. There are many other accounts in the New Testament of people who decided to follow Jesus. A few of these include: John the Baptist (Matthew 3:13-17), Matthew and Levi, sons of Alphaeus (Mark 2:14; Matthew 9:9), James and John (Mark 1:19-20), the thief on the cross (Luke 23:39-43), Joseph of Arimathea (Luke 23:50-53), Stephen (Acts 6:8-7:60), Saul who became Paul (Acts 9:1-19), and Lydia (Acts 16:13-15). We recommend that you

study these and the decisions made by each.

III. Those Who Decided Against Christ

The Bible also tells us about those who decided *against* following Christ. Let's consider a few of these examples.

A. Judas

In Matthew 26:20-25, 47-50, 27:3-10 and the related accounts in the other three Gospels, we have the story of Judas' betrayal of Jesus and its consequence. For the past 2000 years, people have tried to explain why Judas betrayed Jesus. We don't know so anything would be mere speculation. We do know that Satan entered Judas' heart and encouraged him to do it (Luke 22:3-6). Judas' betrayal was a conscious, rational decision. Judas was aware that the Jewish leaders wanted to kill Jesus. This was no deep dark secret. It was common knowledge among the entire population (John 7:25). Judas' first decision was whether or not to betray Jesus. As an insider, he knew the best time and place for turning Jesus over to the authorities. Also, he knew the Jewish authorities would look kindly on anyone who betrayed Jesus to them without causing a riot. Judas was faced with two options. He could remain faithful and follow Jesus or he could betray Him to His political and religious enemies. For whatever reason, Judas decided to betray Jesus. He made his decision, went to discuss it with the Jewish leaders, and accepted the money they paid him.

The next decision was *when* to act. The religious ceremonies during most of the Passover required the population to remain indoors throughout the night. This was an ideal time. Few of Jesus' followers or the general population would be available to oppose His arrest. Judas may have thought he was acting in secret but Jesus knew it (John 13:21-30). Even until the end, Jesus gave Judas the opportunity to change his mind. From the accounts of the Last Supper, Jesus treated Judas as equal to the other disciples. In John 13:27, Jesus told Judas: "What you do, do quickly." Is Jesus telling Judas it was time for him to get on with the betrayal? Or is He telling Judas it was time for him to decide whether or not to carry through with his betrayal plan? All we know is that Judas left and joined Jesus' enemies. Even after Judas joined Jesus' enemies, he had a final decision to make. When the temple police went to arrest Jesus, Judas decided to guide them and point Him out. Unlike the stories of Simon Peter, Andrew, and Cornelius – we are given little insight into Judas' thinking. We are told about his decisions. All along the way to his final decision, Judas made decision after decision to betray Jesus. Anytime along the way, he could have changed his mind and turned back to follow Jesus. However, Judas remained faithful in his steps to serve Satan. The consequences of his decisions were positive *and* negative. The immediate negative was when Judas realized fully what he had done, he killed himself. History records him as betraying a friend. His name is held in extremely low esteem. Even the means by which he betrayed Jesus (a *kiss* of friendship) is now a symbol of betrayal and evil. The positive is that Jesus' death on the cross is the means by which God provides salvation.

B. Agrippa

The story of Agrippa is recorded in Acts 25:13 – 26:32. Agrippa was a great-grandson

of Herod the Great. Like all the other members of his family, he was a tyrant and lived a scandalous life. Also, like the rest of his family, he was forced on the Jewish people by the Romans and hated by the Jews. In this story Agrippa pays a visit to the new Roman governor – Festus. While there, Festus asks Agrippa what to do about the prisoner (Paul) who is granted a legal hearing with Festus and Agrippa. Paul not only details why he is in prison but he also proclaims the Gospel to them. He calls on Agrippa to repent and become a Christian. Agrippa rejects the Gospel but states that Paul should not have been imprisoned.

***In this story, Agrippa has two decisions to make.
One is whether or not to accept Jesus.
The second decision is what he will do with Paul.***

As Festus and Agrippa listen to Paul preaching the Gospel, they are both affected by it. Festus responds by declaring that Paul is crazy. Agrippa knows better because he knows the Law and the Prophets and he knows about the events of Christianity in Palestine and the rest of the Near East. Agrippa ignored the Gospel and sarcastically responded: “In a short time you will persuade me to become a Christian.” Another possible interpretation of this verse is: “In such a short time, do you think that you can persuade me to become a Christian?” Whichever way we interpret it, Agrippa rejected the Gospel. Agrippa decided that he preferred the life he lived and did not want to change it. His second decision was what to do with Paul. After he had studied the legal case against Paul and heard Paul’s own defense, he realized that Paul had been wrongfully imprisoned. He told Festus that Paul should be released. The consequence of Agrippa’s decisions was – as far as what the Bible records – that he never became a Christian. He continued to live a sinful life and treated his people poorly. History says that he eventually had to live the last years of his life in Rome as an exile. Other stories of people who rejected Jesus include the Jewish chief priests and elders (Matthew 26:47, 65-68), Caiaphas (Matthew 26:57-59), Peter (Matthew 26:69-75), Pilate (Matthew 27:11-25), Herod (Luke 23:7-11), Felix (Acts 24:25), Demas (Second Timothy 4:10), and the rich young ruler (Matthew 19:16-22). We recommend that you study these accounts and the decisions made.

IV. What Will I Do with Jesus, the Christ?

We are like the people mentioned in this lesson. We have a decision to make as to what to do with Jesus. Will we accept or reject Him? This is a question that each of us must make on our own. No one else can make it for us. We have a choice. What will it be? We can be like Paul in Romans 1:16-17 when he declares he is not ashamed of the Gospel or we can be like those in Romans 1:18-19 who suppress the truth. Whichever decision we make determines how we live our lives now and where we’ll spend eternity.

V. Conclusion

We are free to decide how we live our lives. We can live for Jesus or live for Satan. There are no compromises – it’s either one or the other. In John 8:32, Jesus says the “truth” sets us free. There is only one truth – the truth of the Gospel. There is only one true freedom, the freedom found in Christ. Jesus tells us He stands at the door of our hearts and knocks (Revelation 3:20). It’s up to us to open the door or leave it locked.

STUDY QUESTIONS

Name _____ Date _____

Mailing Address _____

1. Decision-making is an act of
(a) irresponsibility (b) responsibility
(c) indiscretion (d) all of these
2. Simon and Andrew's first decision was to let Jesus stay in their boat or
(a) throw Him out (b) sink it
(c) set it on fire (d) none of these
3. Simon and Andrew decided to follow Jesus
(a) from a far distance (b) immediately
(c) for 40 days and 40 nights (d) all of these
4. Cornelius was a believer in God who was a Roman
(a) candle (b) soldier
(c) citizen (d) emperor
5. Cornelius was told to send for Peter by
(a) a note on a wall (b) mail from Jerusalem
(c) John Mark (d) an angel
6. Not only did Cornelius have to make a decision, so did
(a) Peter (b) Paul
(c) Jim (d) Dick
7. God helped Peter by sending what upon Cornelius?
(a) Plagues (b) the Holy Spirit
(c) A large white sheet (d) None of these
8. One disciple who refused to change his mind was
(a) Peter (b) Judas
(c) John (d) Harry
9. As far as we know, one consequence of Agrippa's decision is that he never became
(a) a Four-Star General (b) Emperor
(c) a Christian (d) an Ethiopian Treasurer
10. We either live for Jesus or Satan. There are no
(a) choices (b) compromises
(c) consequences (d) all of these