

MATTERS

*of*

LIFE

&

DEATH

## **Matters of Life and Death**

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# Choosing Life

American culture is at a crossroads between life and death. This crossroads also confronts other cultures across the world where corruption is increasingly evident. Wars, rumors of wars, nations against nations, famines, pestilences, natural disasters, and social unrest all threaten and make uncertain the lives of so very many. It also seems that everyone has a different solution to the massive problems overwhelming our world. To some, the solution is victory for a favorite political party or a sound economic recovery policy. To some, it is an international agreement that will de-escalate the tensions of global nuclear war. To others, the solution is a focus on taking actions to save the planet from devastating climate change.

A Godward look reveals that our greatest problem is not an environmental or military one, nor is it an economic or political dilemma. The greatest problem facing every society is a moral and spiritual one. Our cultures have largely forsaken the life-giving truth of the Word of God.

After the giving of the Ten Commandments, Moses said to the Israelites, “I call heaven and earth to record this day against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live” (Deuteronomy 30:19).

The life referred to here is not the “eternal life” of salvation. Eternal life can never be earned through obedience to the Law but can only be received by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. The life that God offers in His Word is the abundant life that comes when faithful men lead their families, their churches, and their communities to live in harmony with God’s Word.

For many years, the Bible, and particularly the Ten Commandments, formed the bedrock of our American society and many others in Western civilization. The Bible was the standard of ethics, the foundation for law and order, and the guide for personal virtue. Today, that foundation has been largely eroded away.

Why then read this book on the Ten Commandments? Because these commandments are a very real call out of darkness and into light and out of death and into life. Ever since the days of Creation, men and women have been presented with a choice between life and death. In Genesis Chapter 2, the Lord God breathed into Adam’s nostrils the “breath of life” and man became a “living soul.” But God told Adam that if he were to eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, “thou shalt surely die.”

When man disbelieved and disobeyed God, he brought upon himself the curse of death. The Apostle Paul wrote in Romans 5:12, “Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned.”



But God has not left man in his sinful and dying condition without hope. He offers life to sinful humanity by giving us two marvelous gifts: His written Word and His living Word.

## **God offers life by giving us His written Word**

The giving of the Word of God was itself an act of grace, even in the Old Testament. We live in a day when the Law of God is hated, rejected, or discounted by many. But the psalmist testified in Psalm 119:97, “O how love I thy law! it is my meditation all the day.” Paul, in Romans 7:12 wrote, “The law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good.”

But the written Law of God was limited in its power. It could give the knowledge of sin. It could define the pathway of righteousness. It could point out the necessity of a blood atonement. It could even promise and describe the coming Messiah and Savior. But the Law could not save. Paul stated very clearly in Romans 3:20, “Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified. . . .” In Galatians 3:24, he explained, “Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith.”

## **God offers life by giving us His living Word**

In describing the incarnation of Jesus, the Apostle John says in John 1:14, “And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us . . . .” This gift of Jesus, the living Word, was the ultimate gift of life! Jesus told Nicodemus, a teacher of the Law, in John 3:16, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have

everlasting life.” Once a person trusts in the Lord Jesus Christ, he possesses life eternal. The Apostle John gives us this assurance, “And this is the record, that God hath given to us eternal life, and this life is in his Son” (1 John 5:11).

When a man’s heart has been transformed by the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, he is able to receive and understand the written Law of God with gratitude and joy. He does not embrace the living Word and discard the written Word. Rather, the living Word draws and enables him to love and obey God’s written Word. A transformed heart obeys the Law of God, not out of obligation or compulsion, but by the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit.

Paul gave testimony to this transformation in Romans 8:4 when he wrote, “That the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.” This truth is emphasized two verses later in Romans 8:6, “For to be carnally minded is death; but to be spiritually minded is life and peace.”

If we earnestly desire this “life and peace,” we must give careful heed to learning, obeying, and teaching the written Word of God to our children. This diligent attention is not seeking to perfect ourselves by the Law of God. Rather, it is receiving with gratitude the commandments and instructions that are given to believers for our good. As a sheep hears the voice of its shepherd, as a son obeys the commands of his loving father, so we should rejoice to hear and obey the commandments of our gracious God Who has manifested His love to us.

Our hope and prayer are that, as you consider the “Matters of Life and Death” presented in this book, you and your family will

experience the blessing of “choosing life.” There is great joy in the abundant life that comes through knowing, loving, and cheerfully receiving both the written Word and the living Word!

This book sets forth ten life-giving truths drawn from the Ten Commandments and illuminated by the full counsel of Scripture throughout the Law, the Prophets, the Gospels, and the Epistles.

One of the unique features of this book is a treasury of inspiring stories drawn from the lives of faithful men of history, from Scriptural accounts as well as from the exciting history of the church over the last two thousand years. Each of these life-giving truths will be examined alongside a biographical sketch of a man who applied in daily life that very commandment under consideration. We invite you to read through the list below of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:3–17) and their corresponding New Testament applications for each one of us today.

## The Ten Commandments and their New Testament Applications

### 1. **Thou shalt have no other gods before me.** (Exodus 20:3)

I am to love the Lord because He first loved me, worshipping Him only. (See I John 4:19.)

### 2. **Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image.**

(Exodus 20:4)

I am to set my priorities and affections toward God, forsaking all forms of idolatry. (See Colossians 3:2.)

**3. Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain.**

(Exodus 20:7)

I am to revere God's name and character in my words, actions, and attitudes, living in holiness because His name is holy. (See I Peter 1:15.)

**4. Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy.** (Exodus 20:8)

I am to give God my time—working, resting, and worshipping each week in remembrance of His Creation and redemption. (See Hebrews 4:9.)

**5. Honour thy father and thy mother.** (Exodus 20:12)

I am to honor my parents, recognizing that God is using them for my ultimate good. (See Romans 8:28.)

**6. Thou shalt not kill.** (Exodus 20:13)

I am to resolve conflicts with meekness, patience, and humility, valuing God's creation of mankind in His own image. (See Matthew 5:21–24.)

**7. Thou shalt not commit adultery.** (Exodus 20:14)

I am to flee the lusts of the flesh and guard my heart, knowing that God designed marriage as a covenant of love between a man and a woman for life. (See Matthew 5:27–28.)

**8. Thou shalt not steal.** (Exodus 20:15)

I am to look for ways to give cheerfully rather than to take selfishly, understanding that I am a steward of what God has given me. (See II Corinthians 9:7.)

**9. Thou shalt not bear false witness. (Exodus 20:16)**

I am to put away lying and hypocrisy, knowing that I am accountable to the God of truth for every word that I speak. (See Matthew 12:36.)

**10. Thou shalt not covet. (Exodus 20:17)**

I am to learn contentment, realizing that the Lord has provided everything I need. (See Philippians 4:11, 19.)

As an appropriate and fitting conclusion to this book, we will also look at the two great summaries of the Law given by the Lord Jesus Himself in Matthew Chapter 22. In the last week of His earthly ministry and only a few days before He went to the cross, Jesus was teaching in the Temple. He had just answered a trick question from the Sadducees concerning resurrection. When the Pharisees saw that Jesus had silenced their rivals, they asked a question of their own. “Then one of them, which was a lawyer, asked him a question, tempting him, and saying, Master, which is the great commandment in the law?” (Matthew 22:35–36).

Jesus answered by citing two different passages in the Old Testament—Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18:

**11. Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment.**

**12. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.**

Jesus said of these two great summaries, “On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” Considering these profound words, we find that to love God is to worship Him alone, to reject all idols, to reverence His name, and to keep His day holy. To love our neighbor is to honor life, be pure in heart, honor personal property, speak the truth, and be content. These two great summaries of the Law will be examined alongside the biographies of men who applied them to daily life.

The Word of God has the power to restore life to our homes, our churches, our communities, and our nation. But we as faithful men of God must read it, meditate upon it, and obey it in daily life. It is to that end that this book is offered to you with the prayer that you will “choose life” by loving and living these life-giving truths.

# The First Commandment

**“Thou shalt have no other gods before me.”**

EXODUS 20:3

IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

**“But as he which hath called you is holy, so  
be ye holy in all manner of conversation.”**

I JOHN 4:19

PERSONAL APPLICATION

**I am to love the Lord  
because He first loved me,  
worshipping Him only.**







INTRODUCING  
THE FIRST COMMANDMENT

# I AM the Lord Thy God

The multitude waited with great expectation at the base of Mount Sinai to hear a message from Jehovah. They had seen the “mighty hand” and “outstretched arm” of the Lord in the ten plagues He had sent to devastate the land of Egypt. At the Red Sea, the waters had parted and the Israelites had walked through the sea on dry ground. After a long journey across the wilderness, they had finally arrived at their destination at the “mount of God.”

Now the people were assembled to hear directly from the mouth of Jehovah. For three days they had prepared themselves for this moment. They had received specific instructions not to approach the boundary that had been clearly established at the base of the mountain.

At dawn on the third day, lightning flashed above and thunder shook the mountain. A thick cloud descended upon its summit,

shrouding the brilliant light that emanated from the very presence of God. The noise of a trumpet blared from the mountain and the ground shook.

At last, Jehovah spoke audibly to His people. His first words to the nation of Israel, recorded for us in Exodus Chapter 20, have become known as the “Ten Commandments.” The first commandment forms the foundation for the rest of the Law: “I am the Lord thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. Thou shalt have no other gods before me” (verses 2–3).

In spite of the fearful nature of the revelation, Moses comforted the people with these words, “Fear not: for God is come to prove you, and that his fear may be before your faces, that ye sin not” (verse 20).

Although the Law of God was given in such a terrifying manner, the revelation was an act of love and grace. God had “set his love” upon Israel and blessed His people with a special relationship with Him. The Hebrew word **תּוֹרָה** (*torah*), usually translated “Law,” tends to carry a negative connotation in our modern world. Yet, the word actually expresses in its very nature a gracious relationship. At its root, *torah* means “to point out, to give direction.” The Law is the personal instruction that comes from the loving relationship that Jehovah has established with His people by covenant.

This covenant relationship makes the first commandment very personal: “I am the Lord *thy* God” (*emphasis added*). He is not just *a* god; He is *our* God! The self-existing, eternal Jehovah has

become our own by an act of His grace. He has revealed Himself to us and called us His own.

Not only has Jehovah God established a personal relationship with us by His grace, He also has redeemed us. “I am the LORD thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.” He redeemed Old Testament Israel on Passover night, when the blood of the lamb was sprinkled upon the doorpost. When did God redeem us? He redeemed the New Testament Church on Calvary, when Jesus, the Lamb of God, made eternal redemption for us upon the cross.

Because God has created us and because He has redeemed us, He calls us to complete and absolute loyalty. “Thou shalt have no other gods before me.” Literally in Hebrew, the command is expressed, “There will not be unto you any other gods before my face.” Having called His people by name, having revealed Himself to them, having performed great miracles on their behalf, and having redeemed them with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, He calls for their absolute and undivided loyalty.

As Christian men, we have a duty to abandon all false gods, all humanistic mentalities, all worldly philosophies, and to give complete allegiance to the Lord our God. We can apply the first commandment to our lives by embracing the first of these life-giving truths:

**I am to love the Lord because He first loved me,  
worshipping Him only.**

## Polycarp of Smyrna

### FAITHFUL IN LIFE, FAITHFUL UNTO DEATH

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Jesus had warned His disciples: “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” (Matthew 24:9).

That time had come. The Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius was on the throne. Throughout the Empire, Christianity was spreading at an astonishing rate. In spite of fire, sword, and beastly fury, Roman officers and even high government officials were being converted from paganism to serve the true and living God of Heaven. It seemed that no matter how many Christians were fed to the lions in the arena, even more converts renounced paganism and swore allegiance to the Lord Jesus the very next week!

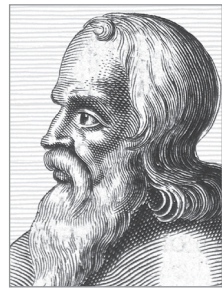
In a somewhat obscure city in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey), far from the seat of imperial power in Rome, there lived an esteemed pastor who had long escaped the fury of Roman persecution. He was well into his eighties, and for many years he had pastored his church. In fact, as a young boy, he had been a contemporary of the Apostle John.

The date was A.D. 162. The place was the city of Smyrna, where this elderly pastor shepherded his congregation. Christ had written a letter to this church. The words of our Lord to the church at Smyrna contained not a single rebuke, and the letter delivered this valuable exhortation: “Fear none of those things which thou

shalt suffer . . . be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life” (Revelation 2:10).

For many years, this steadfast servant of the Lord named Polycarp had lived and ministered in relative peace. Persecution had raged in the city from time to time, and the enemies of the Gospel had sought his life, but he had always been able to escape martyrdom.

However, one day Polycarp was betrayed into the hands of the pagan authorities. The soldiers rushed into the place where Polycarp resided and demanded that he follow them. The venerable old man asked the young soldiers to allow him a season of prayer before he departed with them. Bewildered by this strange request, the inexperienced company saw no reason to deny the man his simple request. Many of these young soldiers were so touched by the fervency and tenderness of Polycarp’s prayers that they later repented.



Polycarp of Smyrna  
(ca. A.D. 76–162)

The devoted minister was brought before the Roman proconsul of the province. Polycarp was next condemned to be publicly burned alive at the stake. Perhaps the words of Christ came back to him: “Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life” (Revelation 2:10).

The appointed day of execution arrived. The old man was led to the agora, which was the marketplace where public executions were held. A stake awaited him. The usual practice in Roman times was to nail the victim to the stake. But Polycarp had given

his word of honor that he would not require the nails. He would stand immovable.

As the hero took his position at the stake, the proconsul, knowing the frailty of Polycarp's aging frame, took pity upon him. The Roman proconsul gave the condemned old man an opportunity to recant. "Swear," the ruler said, "and I will release thee—reproach Christ."

The answer of the venerable man has been recorded in history as among the most famous "last words" of a dying martyr. A hushed silence from the assembled throng awaited his reply. Fixing his eyes upon the proconsul, the old man firmly gave his answer: "Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He never once wronged me; how then shall I blaspheme my King, Who has saved me?"

The order was given. The torch was applied to the wood, and the flames leaped upward. But to the astonishment of the crowd, the flames curled upward and around the martyr, leaving him in their midst—unconsumed—just as happened to Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego who stood untouched in Nebuchadnezzar's fiery furnace! It was as if the flames themselves were protesting the execution and refusing to touch this servant of God.

The entire assembly had the opportunity to observe this miracle. Finally, the executioner was ordered to run the old man through with a sword. As the body of Polycarp was burned to ashes, his spirit returned (Ecclesiastes 12:7) to the God Who promised a crown of life to those who are faithful unto death. For those who are alive in Christ, physical death is nothing to fear. Polycarp could say with the Apostle Paul, "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Philippians 1:21).

Polycarp of Smyrna gives us an early example of how important it is to keep the first commandment. In the hour of martyrdom, he would have no other gods before the living and true God of Heaven. May we be able always to say with Polycarp, “How shall I blaspheme my King, Who has saved me?”

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