

# I Set Before You Life and Death

(Talk #1 “Living in the Heavens” series)

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*by Don James*

*“I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life in order that you may live, you and your descendants, by loving the LORD your God, by obeying His voice, and by holding fast to Him; for this is your life and the length of your days, that you may live in the land which the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give them.” (Deuteronomy 30:19-20)*

## Why This Series?

God wants to renew his Church and bring as many as possible into his glorious life. God is always working to bring his people to maturity in him, to raise up saints, evangelists, people who will manifest his glory and divine plan to the world. God wants a revival – his desire is that all would be saved, that all would enter into his glory.

There have been many revivals throughout the history of the Church, and they typically start with a person or group who encounter God in such a way that they are **utterly convicted of their sin and their unworthiness to stand in the presence of God’s holiness**, and yet they are also **convinced of God’s great mercy and his desire to forgive and restore people to himself**.

In other words, they gain an incredibly clear and convicting **two-pronged vision**: they see the horror of a life without God culminating in the eternal torment of hell, and the complete fulfillment and joy of a life lived for God culminating in the eternal enjoyment of God in heaven. When this vision becomes fastened to the forefront of one’s mind, wisdom, godliness, and a profound zeal are catapulted to a new height within the believer – because one sees what life is truly about and what weight to give to one’s decisions. This allows the Holy Spirit to work more freely and powerfully in the believer because his heart is more determined than ever to do God’s will. This can lead to revival.

The problem that all Christians face is the temptation to take their salvation for granted. We can get so used to a routine that we can *assume* we are doing the “right things” rather than listening to the Holy Spirit who wants to bring about a complete transformation in our lives. Or we can get so used to God’s mercy that we don’t treat sin as a “big deal” and we slowly lose our zeal and vitality as we fail to turn from sin. We’ve heard the saying “get your head out of the clouds” which is directed to those who may be “day dreaming”. In other words – pay attention to reality. But in our case, reality really is “in the heavens” and our life’s goal is to live that reality so that God’s will is done on earth (in our life) as it is in heaven.

This series is about presenting a vision of what the Christian life looks like as well as what the consequences of living apart from God’s truth are. **We need to know both**. We cannot afford to “sugar coat” anything. We need to know what the consequences of our choices are – whether for good or bad – so that we make better choices. We will have talks about heaven, the beatific vision, the heavenly Jerusalem, the Body of Christ and more to help us envision the glory, generosity and authority of God as well as how we were created (the faculties we were given) to allow us to participate in the reality of heaven, building virtue and ending vice, understanding our role in the body of Christ and putting into practice the gifts he has given us. If we pray with these truths and learn to incorporate them into our perspective on life, we will experience a greater desire for God, a distaste for sin, an increase in faith and a greater sense of God’s authority, and a greater hunger for the salvation of souls.

This talk, the first in the series, sets the stage for maturing in Christ. Joshua’s statement, “*I have set before you life and death...*” is the way we need to look at choices. We are working out our salvation daily, and our choices are either bringing us closer to the Lord or they are distancing us from him. We need the “*two-pronged*” vision at the forefront of our mind. This talk will speak mostly about one of the prongs – the consequences of sin. The next talk with focus on the 2nd prong – fulfillment in heaven.

## We Are What We Choose

We've heard the saying "you are what you eat" to indicate that eating nutritional foods will give our bodies what they need to function well and that eating foods with little nutrition will lead to a poorly functioning body. The same is true for our souls.

Our life was never meant to be complicated. We were created with (a) an intellect that could dwell on God and appreciate his infinite goodness toward us and (b) a will that could embrace that goodness and make a return in the form of love and praise to God. This union and enjoyment of God would fill our souls with tremendous joy and peace and our souls would be at rest. We would have no other needs and would be free to love God and each other. But when we fill our minds with ungodly things, as the objects of our affection, we develop an attachment or bond to things that cannot fully satisfy us but that we crave, just to experience the temporary sensation they bring – similar to the way we might crave sweets or junk food that we know does little for our bodies.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church speaks about the role of our will in shaping who we are:

*"Freedom is the power, rooted in reason and will, to act or not to act, to do this or that, and so to perform deliberate actions on one's own responsibility. **By free will one shapes one's own life.** Human freedom is a force for growth and maturity in truth and goodness; it attains its perfection when directed toward God, our beatitude. (CCC 1731)*

*"**The more one does what is good, the freer one becomes.** There is no true freedom except in the service of what is good and just. The choice to disobey and do evil is an abuse of freedom and leads to "the slavery of sin." (CCC 1733)*

The choices we make shape who we are and whether we are free or enslaved. **Freedom is the ability to love, it is the ability to live for the good of another, to love God and neighbor.** When we become slaves to sin, we are no longer free, but have formed within ourselves an addiction to self, an unyielding desire to live for self-gratification, self-preservation, and/or self-glorification. We tend to seek things that indulge our senses and bring us comfort, or we want to avoid things that make us uncomfortable - this is not freedom, this is not of God.

From St. Catherine of Sienna's Dialog – God, talking about the vice of avarice, says:

*"... Oh miserable vices that destroy the heaven of the soul. **Heaven I call the soul because so I made her, living in her at first by grace,** and hiding Myself within her, and making of her a mansion through affection of love. Now she has separated herself from Me, like an adulteress, loving herself, and creatures more than Me, and has made a god of herself, persecuting Me with many and diverse sins. And this she does because she does not consider the benefit of the Blood that was shed with so great a Fire of Love."*

Isn't it amazing that God calls our souls heaven? This makes sense because heaven is where God dwells and is adored – that is what our souls are meant to be! We are so precious to God! He hates to see sin enter our soul, they are a perversion of what we were created for! When we invite sin into our soul, it is like the merchant's in Jesus' day turning his Father's house into a marketplace. We were created to be filled with the glory of God – something that nothing can compare with, something that even the angels will not experience. When we sin, we are exchanging the glory of God for things that will never last or satisfy (possessions, food, entertainment, ...). How can the two be compared? And yet, we still find ourselves gravitating to these earthly things, bringing them into our minds, our memories, our desires, our hearts.

God told St. Catherine of Sienna that we sin because we do not consider the benefit of the blood that was shed for us. In other words, **we do not contemplate the horror that God wants to save us from nor do we contemplate the glory that we've been saved for.** When we do not know the cost of sin or the value of salvation, we do not see a reason to change.

**The wise person is one who weighs his decisions on the scales of truth, with eternity (the two-pronged vision of heaven and hell) in mind.** Because of sin, we tend to weigh decisions based on our feelings, desires/appetites, memories, routines, etc. rather than seeking God's will on the matter. If we view sin as a step toward hell, we see temptation for what it is – not something attractive, but as a trap intended to enslave us. The time we have on earth is the time given to us to mature in Christ. It is all we have and we should make the best use of it.

## A Vision of Hell – A Merciful Revelation

God has allowed some to experience Hell to some degree for their own benefit as well as ours. One of them was St. Theresa of Avila. I want to read a little from her account:

*I understood that the Lord wanted me to see the place the devils had prepared there for me and which I merited because of my sins. This experience took place within the shortest space of time, but even were I to live for many years I think it would be impossible for me to forget it.*

*“... I felt a fire in my soul but such that I am still unable to describe it. My bodily sufferings were unendurable. I have undergone most painful sufferings in this life, ... yet all these were as nothing in comparison with what I then felt, especially when I saw that there would be no intermission nor any end to them.*

*“These sufferings were nothing in comparison with the anguish of my soul, a sense of oppression, of stifling, and of pain so acute, accompanied by so hopeless and cruel an infliction, that I know not how to speak of it. If I say that the soul is continually being torn from the body it would be nothing - for that implies the destruction of life by the hands of another - but here it is the soul itself that is tearing itself in pieces. I cannot describe that inward fire or that despair, surpassing all torments and all pain. I did not see who it was that tormented me, but I felt myself on fire, and torn to pieces, as it seemed to me; and I repeat it, this inward fire and despair are the greatest torments of all...*

*...I know not how it was, but I understood distinctly that **it was a great mercy that Our Lord would have me see with my own eyes the very place from which His compassion saved me.** ... all we have to suffer in this world is as nothing. It seems to me that we complain without reason. I repeat it, this vision was one of the grandest mercies of God. It has been to me of the greatest service, because **it has destroyed my fear of trouble and of the contradictions of the world, and because it has made me strong enough to bear up against them, and to give thanks to Our Lord who has been my Deliverer,** as it now seems to me, from such fearful and everlasting pains.*

*“... I am filled with fear when I see that, after frequently reading books that describe in some manner the pains of Hell, I was not afraid of them, nor made any account of them. Where was I? **How could I possibly take any pleasure in those things that led me directly to so dreadful a place?** Blessed are you forever, O my God! And oh, how manifest is it that you did love me much more than I did love you! How often, O Lord, did you save me from that fearful prison! And how I used to get back to it contrary to your will. [See how even after being touched by God she says she fell]*

*“It was that vision which filled me with very great distress at the sight of so many lost souls, ... and also gave me the most vehement desires for the salvation of souls; for certainly I believe that to save even one from those overwhelming torments, I would willingly endure many deaths. If here on earth we see one whom we specially love in great trouble or pain, our very nature seems to bid us to be compassionate to him; and if those pains be great, we are troubled ourselves. What, then, must it be to see a soul in danger of pain, the most grievous of all pains, forever? It is a thought no heart can bear without great anguish. Here we know that pain at last ends with life, and that there are limits to it, yet the sight of it moves us so greatly to compassion; but that other pain has no ending, and I know not how we can be calm when we see Satan carry so many souls daily away.*

*“This also makes me wish that, in a matter which concerns us so much, we did not rest satisfied with doing less than we can do on our part – that we left nothing undone.”*

We would say that St. Theresa of Avila was a very holy woman before her vision. Yet she seems to indicate that there were times when God would lead her to freedom (grace) and that even after being freed, she would often turn against his will and go right back to the prison. This can happen to all of us – we follow the Lord closely for some time then get tempted in any number of ways to fall away whether through the appetites of the flesh or apathy. Whether we like it or not, we are in a spiritual battle for our souls, and if we are not engaged in it, we are on our way to losing it.

St. Theresa of Avila was grateful for this vision, it helped her to **see things in their proper place**. It motivated her tremendously and gave her victory over the fear of whatever she might suffer in this world. It increased her love and praise of God, knowing more clearly what Jesus died to save her from. It also gave her a tremendous heart for those who need salvation. **If God gave you a vision of hell, do you think it would change your life? If we know it would, why would we need a vision to help us follow Christ more deliberately?**



## Let Us Not Take Our Salvation For Granted, But Press On For The Prize

In our politically correct society, nobody wants to talk about sin. Nobody wants to think that there are consequences to their actions. As Theresa of Avila said – when God shows us the consequences of our sin, it is a great mercy, it is God’s desire to give us knowledge and wisdom so that we would turn from sin and be free. This is contrary to how the world sees God. The world thinks that if God is love, he will forgive all, that what we do is of little consequence. We can fall into this way of thinking as well. We love to look at scriptures like:

*In him you also, who have heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and have believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, which is the first installment of our inheritance toward redemption as God’s possession, to the praise of his glory. (Ephesians 1:13-14)*

We like to think that the reception of the Holy Spirit is a guarantee to us – that we are destined now for heaven. But this is not entirely true. The Holy Spirit is like a down payment, a first taste of the divine life, the one who works to empower us to conform to Christ – but we must be faithful to him. **Sin is a big deal! We cannot take it lightly.** Every sin, no matter how small, is a step away from God and a step toward solidifying a character within us that is opposed to God. St. Paul recognized his potential to turn away from God when he says:

*But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified. (1 Corinthians 9:27)*

*So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, ... work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure. (Philippians 2:12-13)*

Salvation is about more than forgiveness. **It is about living.** It is about being made a child of God, having Christ formed in us.

*To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is **Christ in you, the hope of glory.** He is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone **fully mature in Christ.** To this end I strenuously contend with all the energy Christ so powerfully works in me. (Colossians 1:27-29)*

This is why our decisions are so important. As charismatics, we put a lot of stock in God’s grace and will pray over each other for just about anything (which is a good thing). But we also need to **participate** in that grace through acts of our will. **Grace does not form character, our choices do.** Grace gives us the potential to make better choices, to know God’s will, to have the power to do God’s will – but ultimately, we must make that choice. And it is a choice that we must persevere in, through what we do each day – that is how character is formed. This is why we face temptation each day – not that we would fall to them, but that we would reject temptation and become mature, being made solid in our ability to love God and one another, to be free.

It is when we are firmly rooted in the truth, not being swayed by temptation, passions, or worldly philosophies that we can truly live in the “heavenlies”, bringing the kingdom of God to bear on our life and the world around us.

## Living with Power

What is it that allows God’s Saints to live with power? It is their “yes” to God. It is a persistent “yes” – one that continues even when our flesh wants to say “no”. This “yes” is what allows the Holy Spirit to fill us with truth so that we can see things as they truly are, with an eternal perspective. This “yes” allows the Holy Spirit to put his desires in our hearts. This “yes” allows us to be free, to act for God’s glory and the good of others.

### EXPECT CHANGE

If we are living with a “yes” to God, we should expect change. We should desire change. **We cannot expect to be filled with the glory of God and remain unchanged** – that is impossible! We are moving away from a life led by our desires, memories, hurts, weariness, and fears, that end in the ultimate corruption of our soul to a life of embracing God’s will, knowing his goodness and gaining freedom over what corrupts. If we don’t want to change, we don’t want the glory of God.

God doesn't want us to just survive and simply try to make it through the day, he wants us to **thrive**. He doesn't just want to prune us – he wants us to bear fruit and to enjoy his goodness! This starts with giving God our attention. Dwelling on God allows God to dwell within us with power, to be present to our thoughts, to fill our minds with eternal truth, and to give us the desire to follow him. We thrive through our acts of obedience. It may be getting up earlier to pray, it may be sharing the gospel with a neighbor, it may be disciplining a child in love, ... he wants to transform our actions so that he is involved in them.

## A ROAD MAP TO FOLLOW GOD WITH INTENTION

1. **Pray & Read Scripture Daily** – give God **sufficient time** to form you with his truth.
2. **Examine your Conscience Daily** – don't let yourself live on “autopilot” - that leads to being out of touch with God. We want to learn how to abide in Christ and this requires letting God show us when we obeyed as well as when we turned from him. You are his house, his dwelling place - let him show you what needs to be cleaned out as well as what needs to be brought in, and how you are to act to display his glory. (Areas of consideration: prayer/scripture, relationships, use of time, what we fill our minds with, concern for the world)
3. **Weigh your daily choices on the scales of eternal truth** – understand the possible consequences of your choices. Think in terms of whether your choice will help to form Christ in you or if it adds to a pattern that God wants to break. Learn to bring your decisions to God and to wait for his answer.
4. **Confess Sin Regularly** – there is a tremendous grace when we confess our sin. When we confess our sin, we are establishing truth in our minds and forming our conscience. And as we confess our sin and repent of it, God pours out grace upon us to restore us and to strengthen our union with him.

*“Therefore, with minds that are alert and fully sober, set your hope on the grace to be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed at his coming. As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: “Be holy, because I am holy.” (1 Peter 13-16)*

## Scriptural Resources

Scriptures about the temple of God or being God's dwelling place

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|--------------------------------------|----------------------|
| Ezekiel 36:27                        | Galatians 4:6        |
| Matt 21:12 (Jesus cleans the temple) | Ephesians 2:22; 3:17 |
| Romans 8:15                          | Colossians 3:16      |
| 1 Corinthians 3:16-17, 6:19          |                      |

Scriptural warnings against falling away:

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|-------------------------------|--|
| Matt 24:10-13                 | Hebrews 2:1-3, 3:12-14, 4:1, 6:4-12, 10:26-36, 10:39 |
| Romans 8:5-13; 11:19-22, 6:23 | James 1:12, 4:17                                     |
| 1 Corinthians 9:27            | 2 Peter 1:5-10, 2:20-22                              |
| 2 Corinthians 11:3            | 1 John 2:1   |
| Galatians 5:13                | Revelation 2:4-5, 3:11                               |
| 1 Timothy 4:16                |  |

## Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What was your first reaction to this talk? (surprised, hopeful, defensive, convicted, ...) Why?
2. How do you think God looks at your soul? How do you look at your soul?
3. If God gave you a vision of hell, how would that change your life?
4. Do you think about how your actions shape who you are?
5. What do you think God wants you to change to experience more freedom?
6. Considering St. Catherine of Sienna's remarks about our soul as a “mansion” for God to dwell in, what does God want to remove from your “house” and what does he want you to bring in?