



Last week Xerxes served as an example of the danger of choice, of prioritizing the freedom to choose to the point of distorting reality and blaming others in order to get what we want. This week we see the significance of choices for our developing character and alignment with God's goals. As you read this excerpt from Os Guinness, consider how Esther and Mordecai initially might have seen God in their half-hearted commitment to their Jewish faith and how their experiences and choices shaped them.

Evangelicals are especially vulnerable to the distortion of choice because of the exaggerated place they give to choice in the call to conversion. It may even be their Achilles' heel. Whereas the Jews are the *chosen people*, so that their faith is their destiny, Evangelicals are a *choosing people*, and their faith is often merely their decision. The step of faith is of course a choice, the most important and fully responsible choice a person ever makes. But when the overwhelming emphasis is put on choice as an act of decision, choosing becomes everything, but it can then suffer the fate of many modern choices and shrink to being lightweight, changeable and non-binding. Choice and change are close companions, and those who decide for a faith because they choose to believe it can as easily defect from the faith when they choose not to.

Contrast this modern casualness with the early church's deep theology surrounding conversion and especially the costly stress on the public witness of the sacrament of baptism. This was a direct and deliberate counterpoint to the Roman practice of sacrament. For the Romans, the *sacramentum* was far more serious than a normal oath in a law court. It was the solemn vow by which a person gave his word before an authority and put his life in forfeit as a guarantee of what had been sworn. Those who had given their *sacramentum* were then *sacer*. They were "given to the gods" if they violated the vow. They had given their sacred bond and they were no longer their own. For example, the *sacramentum* was the oath of allegiance sworn by Roman soldiers to the emperor as they joined the legions and by gladiators as they went out to fight and die.

For Christians, then, baptism was no casual choice. It was a public vow, a decisive break with the past and a solemn binding oath of allegiance to Jesus, sworn to God and before God—and before their fellow believers and the watching world. This was probably one reason why there were so many deathbed baptisms. People did not wish to die unforgiven, but neither did they wish to commit themselves any earlier than they needed to live under a vow that was so costly and so binding. Choice today can always be casual, whereas the covenantal vow of faith is costly because we commit ourselves to Jesus and mortgage our very selves as we do so. We have chosen, and we are committed. We have picked up our crosses, and there is no turning back. We are no longer our own.

Os Guinness, *Impossible People*, 69-71.

Our society often encourages us to make decisions without considering the costs, which can contribute to divided loyalties. What else contributes to the tendency to waver between Jesus and the world?

While some believers experience momentous conversions, others come to faith in a long series of almost indistinguishable steps. In either case, how do conversion decisions and the choices that follow shape our character as either hesitant or committed followers of Jesus?

Like a soldier in the Roman army, my desertion or faithfulness to Christ will have far more consequences for me than for the battle or the war. What results can we expect from either desertion or faithfulness?