

TONY EVANS



U-Turns

Reversing the Consequences in Your Life



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NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE

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CHAPTER ONE

You Are Free to Choose Your Direction



Many years ago, out in the country, there lived a young boy in a home without plumbing. His family's house sat on a parcel of land far removed from much of civilization. As can be expected, an outhouse had been constructed some distance from the home. It sat close to a steep ledge that overlooked a creek.

This young boy hated the fact that, regardless of the weather, he had to walk quite a distance to go use the outhouse. Whether night or day, he had to leave the comfort of his home and make the long trek. On one occasion, this little boy's frustration got the best

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of him and,, in a moment of sheer emotion, he shoved the rickety outhouse off of the ledge and into the creek down below.

Later that day, his father approached him with a very grave look on his face. "Son?" he asked.

"Yes, Daddy?" the boy replied, sheepishly.

"Did you push the outhouse off of the ledge and into the creek?"

The son hung his head in shame and said, "Yes, sir, Daddy. I did it."

The father then began to tell him what his punishment would be, only to be interrupted by his son. "But Daddy," he said, trying to get out of his impending punishment, "wait a minute. I learned that when George Washington's father asked him if he cut down the cherry tree, that he told the truth and admitted he did it. And then his father didn't punish him." The boy paused, searching for his father's response on his face. Then he continued when there was none, "I told the truth too. I shouldn't be punished either."

To which his father replied, "Yeah, but George Washington's father wasn't *in* the cherry tree when George chopped it down!"

This humorous story reminds us on a more profound note that decisions really do matter.

When God created humanity, He gave us a will with a capacity to choose. We all have the freedom to make our own choices. Within God's sovereign boundaries, He has established a field of play that allows for our decisions. Like a football field that has lines that do not move, teams are allowed to call their own plays within

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the sovereign lines and boundaries. The plays they call, along with their skillful execution of those plays, by and large determine the outcome of their game.

In creation, God sits sovereignly over our field of play. He has established certain lines that are nonnegotiable. He is King. He sets the boundaries in His realm. Yet within those lines, He has also chosen to give us freedom. He has given us choice. He has created us with the uniquely human characteristic known as free will.

*Decisions really
do matter.*

For example, He told Adam and Eve in the garden, “You are free to eat from any tree of the garden, but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for on the day you eat from it, you will certainly die” (Gen. 2:16–17). Bottom line: God told Adam and Eve that they could choose. He gave them options. He even told them about the consequence if they chose poorly. But then He removed His hands of control on their conscience and allowed them to make the decision.

In giving humanity choice, evil became an option. God never forced evil into the human equation; rather, He allowed it. However, humanity actualizes it when we choose anything that goes against the sovereign and preferred will of God’s rule.

You and I have been given freedom. And while that truth delights us, what many often forget is that with freedom comes responsibility. Yes, we have the freedom to choose for God or to

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choose against God. Yet while we have full ability to make our own choices in this life we've been given, we do not get to choose the consequences. Those have been predetermined by God. Just as God told Adam and Eve that if they chose to eat from the forbidden tree, they would "certainly die," God has consequences established within His rules that will play out if or when we choose against Him.

The freedom to choose is not the freedom to determine the outcomes of those choices. That is a very critical point to understand, because oftentimes when we find ourselves searching for a U-turn or hoping for a reversal or calling on God to deliver us, we forget that it was our own choices that got us lost to begin with. And when we forget that, we also forget to come before the Lord in a spirit of humility rather than entitlement. Yes, He is a good God. No, He is not obligated to make everything good in your life. Romans 8:28 says that God will work all things together for good to those who love Him and are called to His purposes. It doesn't say that all things will be, or will feel, good as they happen.

You may have picked up this book because you are tired of harvesting bitter and failed crops from wrong choices. You may have grabbed this book because you wanted a solution to your life's struggles. And if that's you, then this is the right book. That is my aim in ministering to you through these paragraphs, pages, and points. But what I won't do is give you a solution softened from the blows of God's truth. I won't do that because that is no solution at

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all. Your U-turn takes place precisely at the signposts of His truth, and nowhere else.

In the passage I've chosen to begin this book, Moses has reached his golden years and is delivering one of his final sermons. The children of Israel are about to cross over into the Promised Land; yet before they cross over, Moses wants to talk to them about their freedom to choose. He wants to remind them of the lessons he's learned the hard way, along with those who wandered aimlessly in the wilderness before them. Moses wants to send them forward on good footing so that they can experience all the blessings God has for them. He wants to remind them of the importance of living their lives according to the covenant.

Several times in his speech to his people, Moses uses this term: *covenant*. In fact, his entire talk is even introduced to us in Scripture with a double emphasis on the covenant. We read in Deuteronomy 29:

These are the words of the covenant that the LORD commanded Moses to make with the Israelites in the land of Moab, in addition to the covenant he had made with them at Horeb. (v. 1)

Therefore, observe the words of this covenant and follow them, so that you will succeed in everything you do. (v. 9)

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. . . that you may enter into the covenant of the LORD your God, which he is making with you today, so that you may enter into his oath. (v. 12)

I am making this covenant and this oath not only with you, but also with those who are standing here with us today in the presence of the LORD our God and with those who are not here today. (vv. 14–15)

The LORD will . . . single him out for harm from all the tribes of Israel, according to all the curses of the covenant written in this book of the law. (vv. 20–21)

Then people will answer, “It is because they abandoned the covenant of the LORD, the God of their ancestors, which he had made with them when he brought them out of the land of Egypt.” (v. 25)

A covenant is a divinely ordained and authorized relational bond. It is an official arrangement through which God reveals Himself. A covenant is not a casual discussion. When a man and woman get married, they become bound covenantally. That means a legal action has occurred, not merely a get-together or event. The covenant indicates that, by law, the two are now related as husband and wife.

Israel was God’s covenant people. They belonged to Him in an officially arranged way. That’s why in Deuteronomy 30:19, the

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language Moses uses resembles language you would hear in a court of law. He says, “I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you today.” He speaks of witnesses. He speaks of a formal setting. The covenant between God and His people as they entered into the Promised Land provided the boundaries within which they were to operate. On one hand, when they chose to abide by the covenant, they would receive the benefits of the covenant, such as God’s covering. But when they chose not to abide by the covenant, they would receive the curses of the covenant—otherwise known as consequences.

I often compare a covenant to an umbrella. An umbrella doesn’t stop the rain from coming down, but when you are underneath the covering of the umbrella, it stops the rain from reaching you. Divine covering is a benefit of a covenant. But along with the benefits, there are also negative repercussions. Moses spoke of these as the blessings and the curses. When you read about the Mosaic covenant in Deuteronomy 28 and 29, you come to identify these blessings and curses and how they relate to various aspects of life. Whether it has to do with economics, fruitfulness, family stability, length of days, or business success and failure, the outcomes of individuals’ choices come tied to those choices.

Now, you may be thinking about right now that this is all well and good for the Old Testament. You might be dismissing this opening chapter so far because I’m writing about the Israelites and the law of Moses. It’s true that we are not under the law of Moses, but under the law of Christ. That’s why I want to remind you in

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Hebrews 7:22, the author tells us clearly that we are still under a covenant. He uses the exact same word. We read, “Because of this oath, Jesus has also become the guarantee of a better covenant.” And while it might be a “better covenant,” it is still a covenant. It still comes with choices, as well as consequences for those choices. Thus, when you or I choose to operate outside of the covenantal relationship and rule of the Lord Jesus Christ over our lives, we willingly pursue the negative consequences of our rebellion.

Jesus summed up His relational rule succinctly in His response to a lawyer seeking to test Him. He said,

When the Pharisees heard that [Jesus] had silenced the Sadducees, they came together. And one of them, an expert in the law, asked a question to test him: “Teacher, which command in the law is the greatest?”

He said to him, “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and most important command. The second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commands.”
(Matt. 22:34–40)

Love. This one word lays the foundation of the entirety of the Law as well as the teaching of the Prophets. We are to love God and love others. Anything that we choose to do outside of that one word is rebellion against the new covenant. And, as we will

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learn throughout our time together in this book, rebellion produces consequences.

The choice is ours. And with our choices come either blessings or curses. God made it clear that we live underneath a governing covenant in both the Old Testament and the New.

If you have a child who tells you that they are not going to do what you say, all the while living underneath your authority in your home, that child has made a choice against your rule and relationship. Consequently, you will allow that child to suffer the results of that choice—whether it be punishment from you or loss of privileges. Now, keep in mind, your child's disobedience in no way severs his or her biological or legal relationship with you. He or she is still your child, and you still love him or her as your child. Likewise, our sin does not sever our relationship with God; if we have truly been born again, trusting in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of our sins, nothing can separate us from Him or keep us from entering heaven. But what your child's disobedience does bring upon them is a loss in the immediate benefit from you.

Similarly, when you or I choose to live in disobedience to Christ's rule of love toward God and others, we have removed ourselves from the flow of the blessings of God's covenant in many

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ways. When Moses addressed the Israelites, he told them they had a choice. He said, “I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse” (Deut. 30:19a).

They could choose life. Or, they could choose death. There were no in-between choices. A non-choice was still a choice, because it was not a choice for life. Not to choose is to choose.

Moses laid it all out on the table for them, just as it is laid out for us today under the commandment of love. We have two options: to love, or not to love. Everything relates to our relationship to this new covenant of Christ just as everything related to the Israelites’ relationship with the covenant Moses set before them.

What far too many Christians fail to understand is that, because they insist on living out of alignment underneath God, they choose to forfeit the abundant life Jesus said He came to give. You can’t have both. Jesus said, “I have come so that they may have life and have it in abundance” (John 10:10). But, as with Moses and the Israelites, this life comes tied to the covenantal alignment underneath God’s relational rule.

Moses encouraged the Israelites to choose life. He painted a word picture of what choosing life means when he told them:

“Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, love the LORD your God, obey him, and remain faithful to him. For he is your life, and he will prolong your days as you live in the land the LORD swore to give to your ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” (Deut. 30:19b–20)

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To choose life meant to love God, obey His voice, and remain faithful to Him. In doing so, they were to experience life and prolong their days in the land God gave them. To choose life under Christ's rule remains vastly the same: to love God, obey His voice, hold fast to Him, and to love others. In doing so, we experience the abundant life Jesus has promised.

Now, He didn't say we will experience a problem-free life, but rather that we will have fulfillment in the living. We will have peace. As Jesus said, "I have told you these things so that in me you may have peace. You will have suffering in this world. Be courageous! I have conquered the world" (John 16:33). This life has troubles. It has struggles. It comes with disappointments, heartache, and grief. But in the midst of all that and more, Jesus promises that when we choose life through aligning under His covenantal rule, we get peace. Peace isn't the absence of pain; it is the presence of Jesus to carry you through.

I know firsthand the power of peace. When the walls of loss and uncertainty cave in around me, I know what it means to say the name of Jesus and be filled with His peace. It's that peace that gets you through the days you cannot get through on your own. But peace comes through choosing to align your heart, mind, and actions under the rule of God. When you are out of alignment, you have no legal claim to His peace.

One day I had gotten in my car to drive to the church. I pushed the garage door opener, but nothing happened. Needing to get to a meeting, I decided to call a repairman. The first thing he asked me to do was walk over to the garage door and check to see if the

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canisters at the bottom were facing each other, or if one had gotten knocked to face another direction. This is because when the two canisters fail to align with each other, the signal does not connect, and the garage door will not raise. As soon as I turned the one canister which had gotten knocked out of alignment back toward the other canister, my garage door opener worked just fine. I was free to leave, all because of this powerful thing called *alignment*.

The garage door was too heavy for me to open on my own. It was too difficult for me to force up. But a simple adjustment in alignment did the trick. Similarly, believers who refuse to align to divine rule in their lives face closed doors, blocked destinies, and trapped dreams. It's all about alignment. You cannot ask God for

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align to divine rule in
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and trapped dreams.*

divine favor while simultaneously making choices that go against His revealed will. That's a contradictory request due to the nature of a covenant. Remember, a covenant is a divinely created relational bond that carries with it both blessings and consequences.

Moses made it clear what the consequences would be if the Israelites did not choose life. He said in Deuteronomy 30:17–18:

“But if your heart turns away and you do not listen and you are led astray to bow in worship to other gods and serve them, I tell you today that you will certainly perish

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and will not prolong your days in the land you are entering to possess across the Jordan.”

They would perish. Their dreams would perish. Their plans would perish. Their hopes would perish. All because they chose to be led astray and worship other gods.

We may not have wooden idols in our culture today, or statues to bow down to, but we do have other gods whom far too many of us serve on a regular basis. People have chosen race over God, culture over God, class over God, gender over God, possessions and entertainment over God, and so much more. We keep making all these choices and wonder why things are so chaotic, not only in the world but also in the church. It’s because we keep choosing idols over God’s revealed rule.

How do you know when you’ve chosen an idol? An idol is any unauthorized person, place, thing, or thought that you look to in order to determine your decisions. Whomever, or whatever, influences you to the degree of making the final decision in your life is an idol. If it is not the true, living God and His Word, it is an idol.

You serve what you obey. You worship what you align underneath. If the entertainment industry sways your final decision about something, and it contradicts with God’s rule, then that is your idol. Or if economics makes the final decision, or a friend, a relationship, even a spouse—all of these can be idols. After all, had Adam listened to God rather than Eve, he would not have also eaten the fruit. And we would be living a very different outcome today.

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Any overruling of what God says on a subject in your life—whatever the person, place, thing, or thought is—at that moment and in that decision it becomes your god. It's your idol. And you have removed yourself from the covenantal covering of the umbrella. See, the covering no longer works when you choose an idol. When you choose financial profit over biblical principle, or you choose cultural norms over God's revealed rule—you are worshiping an idol. It's a lot more straightforward than most people like to think. Matthew 6:24 (NASB) states it this way: "No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth." For personal application, you can substitute wealth in there for whatever it is that trumps God's rule in your life and draws you from an intimate relationship with Him. For example:

You cannot serve God and popular opinion.

You cannot serve God and people-pleasing.

You cannot serve God and dishonesty.

You cannot serve God and immorality.

You cannot serve God and pride.

You cannot serve God and secularism.

You cannot serve God and bitterness.

You cannot serve God and yourself.

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You have to choose; what's more: you get to choose. And with those choices come consequences: blessings or curses. Essentially, you get to choose if you experience blessings or curses.

When you think about it, that is a really good thing. God has given us the opportunity to choose whether we want to experience blessings or curses—favor or futility. It's up to us. It's up to you. You get to choose.

Moses described this choice as one between choosing “life and prosperity” or choosing “death and adversity” (Deut. 30:15). Keep in mind that biblical terms for life and death aren't always tied to physical life and death. There would be no one left on earth to read this book if each of us were to die physically whenever we rebelled against God. Nor would there be anyone to publish and print it. Spiritual life involves connection to God and all He supplies. Spiritual death means separation from God who leads to inner turmoil, adversity, futility, and discontentment.

Unfortunately, today, there are many people who are spiritually dead. Even in the church. As a result, their lives are full of the compounding impact of years of negative consequences for wrong choices. But the good news is that we live under the new covenant. We live under the sacrificial atonement of Jesus Christ. We can make a U-turn on any wrong road at any time and start choosing life.

This U-turn begins on an off-ramp named Repentance. It starts by acknowledging the choices, or pattern of choices, that you have

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aligned and made under any other influencer than God Himself. It starts in this spirit of humility that admits wrongdoing.

Then, it continues on an overpass called Grace. This is what God gives you as you are returning to the Lord. You move forward by aligning your choices under His rule, according to His commandment of love, while taking heart the principles of His Word.

God's Word is not a collection of archaic sayings on dusty pages meant only to inspire you. No, God's Word is your very life. As Moses said when he was wrapping up his final speech to the Israelites just before they crossed into the Promised Land:

“Take to heart all these words I am giving as a warning to you today, so that you may command your children to follow all the words of this law carefully. For they are not meaningless words to you but they are your life, and by them you will live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to possess.” (Deut. 32:46–47)

God's Word is not an idle word for you. Indeed, it is your life. And by aligning your life choices under His Word and pursuing an intimate relationship with Him, you will experience the abundant life Jesus has for you. You get to choose whether or not you want that. God is not going to force you to have the blessings He promises to those who seek Him. You get to choose life or death.

At a university nestled in the hills of the eastern part of our nation sat a wise, aged philosopher. This philosopher had a reputation far and wide for giving sensible answers to any question, no

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matter how hard. No one could stump him. Yet one day some clever students thought they had come up with a way to do just that. One of the students caught a small bird and carried it into the wise, old man as the other students gathered around. The students had discussed their plan before entering. They had determined to ask the philosopher if the bird was dead or alive. If the philosopher said the bird was dead, the student would then open his hands and allow the live bird to fly away. And if the philosopher said the bird was alive, the student would squeeze the bird until it died. Either way, the philosopher would at long last be proven wrong. The students thought they had him on this one.

Yet when the student posed the question to the philosopher, and after the murmuring of the other students watching came to a complete silence, the philosopher said nothing at all. Rather, the philosopher looked at the hands of the student holding the bird, and then he looked up at the student himself, then he looked back at the bird in his hands. The student couldn't wait to prove him wrong, so he asked him again, "Is the bird dead or alive?"

To which the philosopher calmly replied, "The answer is in your hands."

The steering wheel to your U-turn along life's journey is in your hands.

Experience the abundant life Jesus has for you

→ *Bestselling author and renowned preacher Tony Evans concludes his series of books about God's direction over our lives.*

In *U-Turns*, Dr. Evans shows readers the reality of human freedom, the consequences that come from negative choices, and the way to reverse those consequences.

By aligning your life choices under God's Word and pursuing an intimate relationship with Him, you can experience the abundant life Jesus has for you. You get to choose whether or not you want that. If you do, you will see how God can reverse the negative consequences of decisions you've made.

Tony Evans is one of the country's most respected leaders in evangelical circles. As a pastor, teacher, author, and speaker, he serves the body of Christ through his unique ability to communicate complex theological truths through simple yet profound illustrations. While addressing the practical issues of today, Dr. Evans is known as a relevant expositor. New and veteran pastors alike regard him as a pastor of pastors and a father in the faith.


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