

CHALLENGED

Joshua 24:14-28

Even the simplest tasks are full of choices. Something as simple as having breakfast involves many choices. Whether to eat or skip it, when to eat, where to eat – at home or in a restaurant, what to eat, how much to eat, etc. Most of these decisions relative to choices are handled pretty much by habit and we really give little consideration to them. Such choices do not usually have a lasting effect, although, in the above example, whether to eat, what to eat and how much to eat can affect our health. Occasionally, we run into choices that have considerable significance. When we recognize these important situations, we need to give thoughtful consideration in the decisions we make relative to these choices. The choice of career, how to plan for retirement, how to plan your will, how to handle that time when you have to depend on others more and more, all of these require a lot of thought and planning. The most crucial choice that anyone will ever make is whether to commit life to God through Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. The eternal destiny of each one of us depends on that choice.

One of the significant decision times in the nation of Israel is recorded in the last chapter of Joshua where Joshua called all the leaders of the people together for the second of two occasions to reaffirm their choice of the direction for their lives. In the first meeting (thought to have been at Shiloh) Joshua wanted to remind the people of all that God had done and to call them to commitment to their responsibility to purify the land and to remain faithful to God.

One of the purposes of our studying the Bible in Bible Study and in worship time is to remind us of all that God has done for us and to challenge us to be about the work of the Kingdom of God. In this second meeting, Joshua met with the leaders at Shechem and called for a renewal of the covenant. Once again Joshua reminded the people of what God had done for them. He also reminded them of the provisions of the covenant and the consequences of breaking the covenant. He then called for the people to make a choice.

The Example Set – 24:14-15

¹⁴“Now, therefore, fear the LORD and serve Him in sincerity and truth; and put away the gods which your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. ¹⁵“If it is disagreeable in your sight to serve the LORD, choose for yourselves today whom you will serve: whether the gods which your fathers served which were beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.” Joshua 24:14-15 (NASB95)

Joshua had just shared with the leaders of all the tribes a message from God regarding their origin starting with Abraham’s call to leave Ur and touched on the major events that brought them to the point of being in the Promised Land and living in cities they did not build and eating from vineyards and olive trees that they did not plant. All this that had happened to them was all the reason they would need to be faithful to Jehovah so that they could continue to enjoy the blessings of being His people.

Each succeeding generation needed to “buy in” to the covenant and personally commit themselves to revere and serve God. This twofold challenge is there for each of us today. To fear or reverence God is the beginning point of worship; however, God calls us to more than worship; He calls us to be about the business of the Kingdom of God. Attitude and action are important in anything with which we become involved. Part of the attitude or the reverence of God involves giving Him not only the place of supremacy but the **only** place in our lives. He is not to be the top priority among many gods that we might worship, He is to be the only One we worship.

The location of this “end of an epoch” meeting that would be the last time the entire nation would come together before scattering to their various inheritances was significant in that it was where Abram had made his first resting place as a stranger in the land, and had received the first promise from God ‘unto thy seed will I give this land.’ This place was also where Abram built his first altar to ‘the Lord, who appeared unto him.’ We can add to the significance of the location that this was also the place where Jacob and his family, in preparation for his journey back to Bethel, had made a clean sweep of the idols of his household, and buried them ‘under the oak which was by Shechem.’

If we read carefully what Joshua called them to do it was not just fear and serve but to do these with sincerity and truth. Sincerity is having alignment of our innermost beliefs with the outward actions of what we do. Beliefs and actions do align when we are in situations where there is no sense of accountability to please others or to make a good impression. These also align many times when we are caught off-guard and do not go through a mental check list of what is an acceptable response. Such unguarded moments result in actions for which we think we need to apologize. We might speak harshly or disrespectfully to someone and we find ourselves saying “You caught me off-guard and I just wasn’t thinking.” We need to pay attention to what we think, say and do when our inhibitions are down. These are giving us a picture of what is really on the inside of us.

We can think of “truth” as being another word for reality. The alternative to reality is our or someone else’s imaginations. You may have notice that some people will tell you things that have no basis other than it was a thought they had as to what might be the cause of something they had observed. This is how false religions get started. This is how urban legends and various superstitions gain credibility. We might conclude that one thing is worse than not knowing the truth and that would be believing something to be true when it is actually false.

The call was to put away the idols (gods) that the people had been carrying around with them. These had likely been passed on from generation to generation. Abraham's family had been idol worshipers and the people had been exposed to idol worship in Egypt. It is probable that many families had idols in their possession on which they relied to some extent. These may have been little more than “good luck charms” or maybe just decorations used in the home or something similar; however, they had no place in the life of the believer.

Today we might be asked to throw away the rabbit's foot or get rid of the horoscopes or stop doing whatever rituals we do for luck and to rely ONLY on God. When we have done that, then we must follow through with service to God. Service is essentially a matter of obedience in our daily lives – doing what He says to do as we relate to others, to ourselves and to the physical world in which we live. As we do this, we must guard against letting such “obedience” become rituals that we perform because we know that “it’s the right thing to do” rather than it being a natural consequence of the love of God that is in our hearts. In other words, the obedience we demonstrate in our lives must be sincere and not just to impress others. A good word for us today as Christians is the following quotation: “Doing the ‘right thing’ because we are FREE in Christ is the essence of Christians living under grace! Doing the ‘right thing’ because we are obedient to a ‘commandment’ is the essence of Judaism or living under the law!”

What do you think about Joshua giving them an option to choose whom they would worship and serve? He did not tell the people, “You have to do this!” He essentially told them that if it was not the right thing for them as individuals to serve God, then they should pick whatever god they were going to serve. It should be a conscious choice and not something that just happens by default. Another consideration is that any “religion” that attempts to force

compliance to the tenets of that religion is built on a false premise. How ridiculous is it that Islam imposes the death penalty on those who choose to abandon Islam for another religion? It doesn't make any more sense that the Spanish Inquisition in which people were tortured until they confessed Catholic beliefs.

The unspoken truth here is that we WILL honor and serve something or someone as our God (god). The only choice we have in the matter is who or what will that be. Those who claim to be atheists will deny that they honor or serve any god; however, they have simply chosen "self" to be their god. They have set themselves up as that which is ultimately right and they may even quote Shakespear in declaring that they are true to self which is a blatant admission that they do, in fact, honor and serve self.

Joshua was a good leader in that he provided a good example: "but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." The response from the leaders was immediate. They knew what answer Joshua wanted and they were very quick to speak.

The People's Reflection – 24:16-18

¹⁶ The people answered and said, "Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods; ¹⁷ for the LORD our God is He who brought us and our fathers up out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage, and who did these great signs in our sight and preserved us through all the way in which we went and among all the peoples through whose midst we passed. ¹⁸ "The LORD drove out from before us all the peoples, even the Amorites who lived in the land. We also will serve the LORD, for He is our God." Joshua 24:16-18 (NASB95)

This is certainly the right answer to the challenge that Joshua gave them. In answering, they recited some of the same benefits that Joshua had just reminded them that God had provided. In making a conscious choice, these people would be foolish to not choose God and they knew that no other choice made any sense. Nevertheless, even though they knew the truth of the matter, it is likely that each of the leaders relied in one way or another on some of the idols that were in their homes. They probably had not considered the full implication of what serving God was all about. Specifically, they had not considered the seriousness of making a commitment to God. We hear very little of the seriousness of our Christian walk. The call to live a godly life in Christ Jesus needs to be the herald cry from every pulpit in the land. They needed to consider the truth of what Moses had told them before they arrived at the land of promise: "Better not to vow than to vow and not pay."

A Sober Warning – 24:19-20

¹⁹ Then Joshua said to the people, "You will not be able to serve the LORD, for He is a holy God. He is a jealous God; He will not forgive your transgression or your sins. ²⁰ "If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, then He will turn and do you harm and consume you after He has done good to you." Joshua 24:19-20 (NASB95)

It would seem that Joshua thought that the leaders (on behalf of all the people) had responded somewhat glibly and without thinking about the consequences of what they were vowing to do. These are strange words coming from Joshua. This is surely what he wanted them to say and yet he immediately tells them that they are not able to do what they just promised to do. This response from Joshua violates all the rules of modern psychiatry about helping a person have a positive self image and confidence.

Joshua was concerned about overconfidence on the part of these people. They answered very quickly and did not think about what was involved. Joshua's response was right on target. Our ability to serve God is not adequate. We must have help from God in order to be able to serve Him. Today we would say that God empowers us by His Holy Spirit so that we can follow Him. Any time we try to please God in our own strength we fail. Without faith it is impossible to please Him. What Joshua was telling the people is the truth that "salvation by works does not

work.” The wages of sin is death and without God’s grace sin does us in.

One thing that was missing from the response of the leaders was any follow-up action such as actually getting rid of all the idols and false religion artifacts that were in many of the family households. Joshua’s call for commitment was one of entire surrender to God and he was concerned that the people took that call too lightly. I would guess that same problem is at work today among many church members. We surrender everything except the household gods, the worldly traditions, the pagan practices, the reliance on superstitions, and our reliance on government rather than reliance on God.

Joshua’s warning has two main points: the extent of the obligations which they were so lightly incurring, and the heavy penalties of their failure to follow through on their commitment. It is likely that the concept of ‘serve the Lord’ was just a matter of outward acts of “religious rites.” That idea is not different from pagan thoughts about “serving.” The idea that the service of a god implies any duties in common life beyond ceremonial ones is wholly foreign to paganism in all its forms. The primary difference in worship of the One True God and pagan worship goes beyond monotheism versus polytheism. The difference gets to the heart of the matter of an expectation of purity and holiness versus rites and rituals. It was this concern about their fundamental understanding that caused Joshua to broadly assert the impossibility of their serving the Lord with their lack of understanding of what was really required.

A Public Declaration – 24:21-28

²¹ The people said to Joshua, “No, but we will serve the LORD.” ²² Joshua said to the people, “You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen for yourselves the LORD, to serve Him.” And they said, “We are witnesses.”

²³ “Now therefore, put away the foreign gods which are in your midst, and incline your hearts to the LORD, the God of Israel.” ²⁴ The people said to Joshua, “We will serve the LORD our God and we will obey His voice.” ²⁵ So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and made for them a statute and an ordinance in Shechem. ²⁶ And Joshua wrote these words in the book of the law of God; and he took a large stone and set it up there under the oak that was by the sanctuary of the LORD. ²⁷ Joshua said to all the people, “Behold, this stone shall be for a witness against us, for it has heard all the words of the LORD which He spoke to us; thus it shall be for a witness against you, so that you do not deny your God.” ²⁸ Then Joshua dismissed the people, each to his inheritance. Joshua 24:21-28 (NASB95)

After these sobering words from Joshua, the people stood by their commitment to serve the Lord. From the record that is given in the latter part of this chapter, this generation did maintain faithfulness with God in spite of having pagan influence in their homes. In talking about renewing the covenant, which is what was going on here, there are usually witnesses to making the contract. Each person could serve as a witness to all the others.

To help remind the people of what they had committed to do, Joshua recorded the covenant and also set up a memorial stone near the place of worship. These were to serve as reminders for the people. We need constant reminders of our vows to God, we need to have someone challenge us when we answer too quickly with a textbook answer as to our commitment to serve God, and we need to consider the seriousness of our choice to serve God.

Alexander MacLauren reminds us that there is still abundant need for Joshua’s warning. We often talk about that it takes so little to be a Christian that the simplest act of faith binds the soul to the all-forgiving Lord. We need to balance that and not forget that, on the other hand, it is hard to be a Christian indeed; for it means ‘forsaking all that we have,’ and loving God with our entire being. The measure of His love is the measure of His ‘jealousy,’ and He loves us no less than He did Israel. Unless our ideas of serving Him are based upon our recognition of His holiness and demand for our all, we, too, ‘cannot serve the Lord.’