

CHOOSE THIS DAY WHOM YOU WILL SERVE

Joshua 24:14-22

¹⁴ “Now fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your ancestors worshiped beyond the Euphrates River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. ¹⁵ But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.”

¹⁶ Then the people answered, “Far be it from us to forsake the LORD to serve other gods!

¹⁷ It was the LORD our God himself who brought us and our parents up out of Egypt, from that land of slavery, and performed those great signs before our eyes. He protected us on our entire journey and among all the nations through which we traveled. ¹⁸ And the LORD drove out before us all the nations, including the Amorites, who lived in the land. We too will serve the LORD, because he is our God.”

¹⁹ Joshua said to the people, “You are not able to serve the LORD. He is a holy God; he is a jealous God. He will not forgive your rebellion and your sins. ²⁰ If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, he will turn and bring disaster on you and make an end of you, after he has been good to you.”

²¹ But the people said to Joshua, “No! We will serve the LORD.”

²² Then Joshua said, “You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen to serve the LORD.”

“Yes, we are witnesses,” they replied.

Romans 3:9-20 No One Is Righteous

⁹ What shall we conclude then? Do we have any advantage? Not at all! For we have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under the power of sin. ¹⁰ As it is written:

“There is no one righteous, not even one;¹¹ there is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God. ¹² All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one.” ¹³ “Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit.” “The poison of vipers is on their lips.”

¹⁴ “Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness.” ¹⁵ “Their feet are swift to shed blood; ¹⁶ ruin and misery mark their ways, ¹⁷ and the way of peace they do not know.”

¹⁸ “There is no fear of God before their eyes.” ¹⁹ Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. ²⁰ Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God’s sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin.

MESSAGE:

Joshua was a mighty servant of God. After Moses died, Joshua led the Israelites into the land of Canaan—the land of milk and honey which God had promised to Abraham as a homeland for his descendants. Under Joshua’s leadership, the Israelites conquered almost all the tribes that were living there, made it their homeland and called it Israel. At the end of his life, Joshua gathered all the people of Israel together at Shechem and said to them: *“Choose this day whom you will serve: the Lord God of Israel—or the gods of the pagans.”* And all the people shouted in reply: *“We will serve the Lord our God and obey him!”* Then the people all went out and obeyed every command the Lord had given them. Right? Well, not quite. Actually, it would be hard to name *one* of the Lord’s commands the people of Israel consistently obeyed. On the contrary, they continually broke every single one the Lord had given them. It would be hard to imagine a more rebellious, disobedient and just plain disagreeable people than the Israelites. Just check out their record.

When Moses appeared to lead them out of their slavery in Egypt, their response was: *“May the Lord look upon you and judge you.”* (Ex. 5:21) (Welcome home, Moses!) When they reached the Red Sea they groused: *“Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us out to the desert to die?”* (Ex. 14:11)

After Moses parted the Red Sea and led them to safety they complained: *“What are we to drink?”* (Ex. 24) After Moses provided them with water, they grumbled: *“...you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death.”* (Ex. 16:3) And after God provided them with manna from heaven they complained, *“If we only had meat to eat...we never see anything but this manna!”* (Num. 11:4,6)

At Mount Sinai, when God showed them his glory and gave them instructions to live by, they showed their gratitude by creating an idol, a golden calf, and worshipping it instead of God.

Later in the desert they mounted a full scale rebellion against Moses. And when God finally brought them to the land he had promised Abraham, they refused to enter it. Is it any wonder God called them a stiff-necked people?

So when Joshua said to them, *“Choose this day whom you will serve: the Lord God of Israel—or the gods of the pagans”* and they all shouted out, *“Far be it from us to forsake the Lord to serve other gods!...We too will serve the Lord, because he is our god...”* Joshua rebuked them, saying: *“You are not able to serve the Lord. (Joshua 24:15, 16, 19)*

And that raises a question, doesn’t it? Since Joshua knew the people couldn’t do what they said they were going to do, why did he offer them a choice in the first place? The text answers that question very clearly. When they responded to Joshua’s accusation, saying, *“No! We will serve the Lord,”* Joshua said, *“You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen to serve the Lord.”* (Joshua 24:21-22) Their promise to serve the Lord would serve in the future as a witness against them, testifying to them in their hearts

and minds that they had broken their promise to serve the Lord by following the path of disobedience. It would teach them that their compulsion to disobey was far more powerful than their desire to obey.

They didn't disobey because they were confused about what was right and what was wrong. They didn't disobey because they were tempted past their power to resist. They didn't disobey because times change and values change with them. They disobeyed because they wanted to disobey. They were by nature disobedient.

I've told some of you this story, but when I was in the 2nd grade, a man visited our class and talked to us about smoking. *"Don't ever, ever smoke cigarettes,"* he said. And he gave us lots of reasons why we should never, ever smoke cigarettes. Now it had never occurred to me to smoke a cigarette, but after school I went home, filched a cigarette out of my mother's purse, and lit up. I had no earthly reason to do it except that I had been told not to do it. Just like the Israelites, I was, by nature, disobedient. *"Why did the kids put beans in their ears? They did it 'cause you said 'No,'"*

The reason these in the *Book of Joshua* were set down for us is not so that we can better understand the ancient Israelites, but so that we can better understand ourselves. For like the Israelites, we are a stiff-necked people. And it has to be proven to us over and over again just how stiff-necked we really are.

We continually witness against ourselves with the choices we make. We choose to create human life in the womb and then make laws which protect our right to tear it out and throw it away. We call this a "right to privacy" which is enshrined in something called a "penumbra" of the Constitution.

We interpret the 2nd Amendment of the Constitution which guarantees the right to the free expression of religious beliefs to mean that the government has the right to limit the free expression of religious beliefs.

We demand the right to disseminate obscenity, vulgarity and blasphemy under the name of "art" and heap scorn upon anyone who objects, calling them prigs and prudes and calling their objections censorship.

Such choices witness against us. Like the Israelites, we are opinionated people who continually imagine that our way is THE way and that the sooner everyone else—including God—figures that out, the better off they'll be. This opinion of ours can even set the tone of our prayers, many of which can be summarized as, *"Dear God, please do what I think you ought to do. In Jesus' Name, Amen."*

Like the Israelites, we love having a choice. In fact, we demand having a choice. The problem is, we often choose our way instead of God's way. And we choose our way not because we lack discernment, but because we want things that are bad for us. And until we learn this about ourselves, we don't understand ourselves at all. We go through life blaming everybody else and everything else for our problems and give ourselves credit for the good God does in our lives.

In Jesus' words, we are blind guides, whitewashed tombs, vipers and hypocrites—and we are proud of it! Only when we renounce our pride and let the Holy Spirit show us the truth about ourselves—what stiff-necked, congenitally disobedient, obnoxiously opinionated and just plain disagreeable people we are—can we stop relying so much on OUR choices and embrace God's truth. Only then can we despair of our own strength and trust in God's strength. Only then can we become servants of righteousness rather than slaves of sin.

In other words, only then do we become **teachable**. Only then do we begin to discover—to our joy and amazement—that God's truth doesn't merely instruct us—it changes us, forming us into someone who bears the image of our Savior.

Paul wrote to the Romans: *“Thanks be to God that though you used to be slaves to sin, you obeyed from the heart the form of teaching to which you were entrusted.”* (Rom. 6:17) God entrusts us, hands us over to the truth of His word and the re-creative power of the Holy Spirit and we are molded by it in the same way as molten gold conforms to the shape of the mold into which it's poured. And the shape of the mold that re-forms us is the image of Adam and Eve before before they trusted their own choice rather than God's promise.

Can you imagine the joy of being set free from the tyranny of your bad choices and human opinions? Of being able to get through your morning shower without getting mad at the president or at those who attack him? Of being able to get through breakfast without sneering at the news or waxing sarcastic over some politician's latest blusterings? Of being able to listen to someone else's ideas that conflict with our own without responding by trying to set them straight about what they *ought* to think?

We waste so much time and energy trying to convince others—especially those in our own families—that we are right and that they are wrong. How successful have we been? And how much does it really matter?

If you want to show others—especially those in your own family—something truly wonderful, something miraculous, something that will be a blessing to them and to you: show them a person being transformed by God. Show them someone who is learning how to display love in everything he says and does and never passes up an opportunity to keep his mouth shut.

You can choose this day whom you will serve. You can yield yourself up to yourself, your precious choices and opinions, or you can yield yourself up to God and allow Him to make something beautiful out of you.

Amen.