

“Now fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your forefathers worshiped beyond the 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 forefathers served beyond the River, 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 fathers 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.

²³ “Now then,” said Joshua, “throw away the foreign gods that are among you and yield your hearts to the LORD, the God of Israel.”

²⁴ And the people said to Joshua, “We will serve the LORD our God and obey him.” (Joshua 24:14-24)

What Would You Choose?

Decisions are tough, sometimes. Where to go to college, whether to take a job or to look for a different one, whether to buy a house, whether to accept an offer on your house – these are all decisions that we wrestle with. Yet, sometimes, when we look back on those choices, it seems like the one we made was almost inevitable. Sometimes, the best option is clear, and we just need to see it for what it is. Today, the Old Testament leader Joshua poses a choice for God’s people: worship the Lord or worship heathen gods. Do you think that he meant for that to be a hard choice? Not really. We didn’t read the verses that lead up to our text, but before he told them to choose, he reminded them of how God had brought Abraham to this land and he had promised to give it to his descendants. He reminded them how God had brought them up from slavery in Egypt and across the Red Sea and how he had led their armies to conquer that land. And then he told to choose whether to follow that God or the idols of the other nations. Is there any doubt what choice Joshua wanted them to make? And is there any doubt what we would choose if God sent a pastor to pose the same choice to us? My friends, **what would you choose?**

I.

Wouldn’t you choose God because of his great acts of salvation? This was the end of Joshua’s public service to Israel. He was the successor to Moses. God called him to lead Israel in conquering the land. But that phase of their history was over. Joshua was 110 years old and about to retire. This choice that he put to his people was his final call to be faithful to the Lord. Before he said one word about choices, he recounted all that history of God’s grace and then he said, **“Now fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your forefathers worshiped beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD.”** After telling them to choose whether to follow God or the idols of the past, he said, **“But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.”**

Joshua was not talking to unbelievers. Joshua was not giving them a choice whether to believe in God or not. He was talking to people who knew the Lord. He was calling them to be sincere and devoted in their faith. You see, when the Holy Spirit gives us faith, he plants a new believer inside us, a believer that wants to follow God. God expects” the new us” to make a commitment to following him and to fighting against temptation. So Joshua called on them to make a commitment to serving God with all their hearts and to carry out that commitment in how they lived.

The people responded exactly the way Joshua wanted to them to. They said, **“Far be it from us to forsake the LORD to serve other gods!”** Then they clearly confessed that God had set them free from Egypt and had done all those miracles, that God had protected them from their enemies and given them this land. That confession is very important because it shows why Christians follow God. The deliverance from Egypt is *the* great act of the Old Testament. You have to know what God did in Egypt to understand almost everything else that’s written in the Old Testament because that was when God saved his people. They were slaves. God had mercy on them and he did the most dramatic miracles of the Bible to set them free and bring them home. The deliverance from Egypt was one half of the gospel in the Old Testament. The other half is the many prophecies and promises of Jesus coming to set his people free from slavery to sin and death and to give them eternal life. The Bible teaches that the Old Testament rescue from slavery pointed to the New Testament rescue from slavery. So when the people committed themselves to following God because of his great acts of salvation, they were basing their commitment on the gospel, not on the law. They were moved by God’s undeserved and unstoppable love to follow him. That is the same love that ultimately sent them Jesus.

Is it any surprise that they made the right choice? Wouldn’t you and I make the same one – not just in the Old Testament, but today? God willing, this is not my last sermon to you. But if it were and I stood up here and called on to choose whether you were going to be faithful to God or whether you were going to follow the idols of our age, wouldn’t you choose the Lord? And why? I am confident that you would make a confession of faith in Christ. Jesus is the Son of God who left heaven behind to be born here to save us, who lived as a carpenter’s son, who endured opposition and pain and then death and hell on the cross so that you and I can be free from death and hell and finally even from all pain and sorrow. Jesus died and he rose and we know that we will rise. Jesus promised that he will never leave us. He rules all things in our lives and in our world for our good. He promises to do everything to bring us home to heaven. What other god could we possibly choose?

So it’s striking how Joshua answered the people’s commitment. He said, **“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. 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.”** I don’t know if I could say that. Every year, I stand up here with the youth of our congregation and I ask them to make a promise that they will remain faithful to the gospel, that they will suffer death and all rather than fall away from the truth, and that they will regularly come and hear the word and come to communion. When they make that promise, I never answer, “I don’t think you guys can do it!” But Joshua did. Why?

He wanted them to understand what they were promising. When we promise to follow God and then we abandon that promise, we deserve his anger. When someone knows and believes the gospel, but then they fall away, the Bible does teach that they are worse off in hell than if they had never known their Savior. So Joshua warned them of the weakness of their sinful flesh. When they insisted that they would follow the Lord, he said, **“You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen to serve the LORD.”** Joshua didn’t give them any wiggle room to serve God and the idols of this life. He bound them to serve the Lord and to suffer the consequences if they fell away. The truth is, we are bound by the same realities. When we stand before the Lord and swear to follow him, to live by what he says, to hear his word and come to communion, to conform all our lives and our doctrine to the teachings of Scripture and to suffer death and all rather than fall away, we are witnesses against ourselves if we don’t keep that oath. On Judgment Day, God is going to plug in the eternal DVD player and he is going to play back the promise of every Christian who took that oath and then abandoned it. Then judgment will follow.

What will God play back for us on that day? If he judged us by how faithfully we have kept our word, wouldn’t we be in trouble? We have sinful hearts. As much as we mean it when we stand up here and make a commitment to follow Christ all our lives, we are weak and sinful and sometimes we’re just too egotistical to keep the commitment we made to our Lord. But on Judgment Day, God is not going to play the DVD of all our failures. Christ has replaced our sin with his perfect obedience. His blood has washed all our unfaithfulness away and his resurrection is God’s promise that all that our sin and failure and unfaithfulness are forgiven forever. So on Judgment Day, God is going to play a sanitized version of our lives – one that depicts Christ being perfect in all that we did and said and thought and felt. He’s going to call us perfect and admit us to heaven.

II.

On the basis of that promise we make our commitment to follow Christ. That's what we do when we're confirmed either as children or adults. God does call us to follow through and turn from all the false gods of this life and follow him. If I asked you each to come up here today, **what choice would you make? Wouldn't you choose God and throw away the idols of this life?**

Joshua ended his speech with a repeat of that call to faithfulness. He said, **"Now then, throw away the foreign gods that are among you and yield your hearts to the LORD, the God of Israel."** What does "yield your hearts" mean? Joshua was talking about sincere faith, not just lip service. And he told them to throw away the idols that were still among them. What is the relationship between those two things? The action of throwing away the idols was not a good work that saved them. It only did them good if they did it because of the sincere faith in their hearts. And the faith in their hearts can only be considered sincere if they were willing to throw away the idols of their lives. So each one constantly leads to the other.

The same is true for us today. What are the idols of our lives? Statues and carved idols are not a big temptation in our world today. But there are idols that threaten us: the worship of money, of popularity, of recreation – kids' sports, vacations, expensive electronic toys, or even the worship of family. What does that mean? Do you care more about what your family says about something than what God says? Do you hide your faith in order not to offend them? If any of those things keep us from hearing God's word – worse if those things change our attitude so that we don't listen to God and we want the things our unbelieving society wants, if they make us greedy and jealous and self-serving, we are putting them in God's place in our hearts.

God is supposed to come first in our lives. When we let anyone tell us to do things that he says are wrong, when we let any desire of this life lead us away from him, we are loving those people or things instead of God. God calls us to have a sincere devotion to the Lord and to throw away all those idols. If we're not willing to do that, then the words we speak on Sunday really have no meaning. God looks at our hearts, but he also looks at our lives. What we do betrays what is in our hearts. No matter how many times I say the right thing, if my life is all about pursuing the wrong thing, I'm worshipping an idol. The reverse is also true: if I go through the motions and I get rid of everything that could be a problem, if I go beyond anything God has said and throw out my TV and my computers and my tablets, if I'm careful to obey every rule I was taught in catechism class, but I do it all because I think that I'm earning points with God, I'm not doing it because I trust in his love. I'm really worshipping myself.

The truth is, my friends, we will struggle against idol worship for as long as we live here because every sin involves loving something or someone more than we love God. For that, we all deserve his punishment in hell. But Jesus came down from heaven to set us free. Of all the people who ever lived, only Jesus always put God in first place. Because he was the Son of God made man, that perfect life of dedication to God counts for every human being who ever lived. Then Jesus went to the cross and he paid for every sin of every sinner who will ever be born. He paid for you and he paid for me. God raised him on the third day to show us once and for all that we are indeed forgiven. God has wiped all our idol worship away.

Rejoice in the great acts of salvation that Jesus did. Even though it may not seem as dramatic as parting the Red Sea, God entering this world is an even bigger miracle than the ones he did in Egypt. God lived and died and rose again as a real human being for us. You all know that. Now make a commitment to God, on the basis of his love. Because you are free from hell, because you are declared not guilty, because you will live with Christ forever, live for him now. Hear his word and change your life to match what you hear. Throw out every idol that leads you away from God. Trust that he will work through the gospel to give you the faith that will enable you to do that. Amen.