

COMMITMENT TO THE COVENANT

JOSHUA-THE ADVENTURE AND VICTORY OF FAITH

by Doug Goins

Life is getting more and more difficult for us because we live in the midst of so much change. There is such information overload, so many facts coming at me from all the media and the Internet. There are so many opportunities to invest my time and energy. There are so many relationships that I could invest myself in. There are too many choices to make. Probably every generation feels they're unique in regard to this effect of "future shock," as Alvin Toffler called it.

There is a similar disorientation at work today in our culture reflecting itself in spiritual restlessness, in moral and ethical indecisiveness. We are living in a time when the gospel of Jesus Christ is seen as just one of many religious choices. Even Christians can become spiritually disoriented.

Joshua saw this same dynamic at work in the people of Israel after the conquest and settlement of Canaan. It's this issue of indecisiveness that Joshua addresses in the powerful sermon he gives in chapter 24. Let's look at verses 1-2, which introduce the assembly gathered to hear Joshua:

Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel; and they presented themselves before God. And Joshua said to all the people, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel..."

Joshua is at the end of a long, full life. His greatest concern before he dies is not himself, but his people and their relationship with the Lord. In chapter 23 he called the leaders of the nation together and told them that he was "about to go the way of all the earth." But first he challenged them to love the Lord and to keep the commandments that God had given them in love. He warned the leaders of the frightening danger that the nation would be in if they led their people in deserting the Lord.

Reviewing history

But now in chapter 24 he speaks to all the people. He calls them to re-evaluate and renew their love relationship with God. He does this in a couple of ways in verses 2-15: First, he reviews places, names, and incidents from their salvation history. Second, he calls them to evaluate what they've heard and then respond to it. The God of Israel himself is speaking through Joshua:

"Your fathers lived of old beyond the Euphra'tes, Terah, the father of Abraham and of Nahor; and they served other gods. Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan, and made his offspring many. I gave him Isaac; and to Isaac I gave Jacob and Esau. And I gave Esau the hill country of Se'ir to possess, but Jacob and his children went down to Egypt. And I sent Moses and Aaron, and I plagues Egypt with what I did in the midst of it; and afterwards I brought you out. Then I brought your fathers out of Egypt, and you came to the sea; and the Egyptians pursued your fathers with chariots and horsemen to the Red Sea. And when they cried to the LORD, he put darkness between you and the Egyptians, and made the sea come upon them and cover them; and your eyes saw what I did to Egypt; and you lived in the wilderness a long time. Then I brought you to the land of the Amorites, who lived on the other side of the Jordan; they fought with you, and I gave them into your hand, and you took possession of their land, and I destroyed them before you. Then Balak the son of Zippor, king of Moab, arose and fought against Israel; and he sent and invited Balaam

the son of Be'or to curse you, but I would not listen to Balaam; therefore he blessed you; so I delivered you out of his hand."

The reason Joshua includes this bit of genealogy about Balak the son of Zippor and Balaam the son of Be'or is to convey that what he is relating is historical fact. This is not mythology, like the story of Paul Bunyan. These were real historical figures who interacted with the people of Israel.

He continues in verse 11 with how he gave this promised land of Canaan into their hands:

"And you went over the Jordan and came to Jericho, and the men of Jericho fought against you, and also the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites; and I gave them into your hand. And I sent the hornet before you, which drove them out before you, the two kings of the Amorites..."

The hornet is a figure of the panic that preceded the Israelites. Remember when they came into the land, the people were already terrified because they had heard of the power of the God whom these people loved and served.

"...It was not by your sword or by your bow. I gave you a land on which you had not labored, and cities which you had not built, and you dwell therein; you eat the fruit of vineyards and oliveyards which you did not plant."

The phrase "I gave you" is repeated a number of times in this history. Everything was a gift of God's grace-their deliverance from Mesopotamia, the freedom from bondage in Egypt, the provision through the wilderness years, the conquest in the land of Canaan.

Escaping indecision

Then in verses 14-15 Joshua ringingly challenges the people. He speaks on his own now; this is not God speaking. Joshua is responding to this awesome saving activity of the Lord. He issues a challenge to Israel to decide for or against exclusive devotion to God:

"Now therefore fear the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods which your fathers served beyond the River, and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. And if you be unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell; but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD."

Joshua challenges the people with a spiritual unsettledness that marks their lives. He even implies that some of them have brought with them from Egypt, or acquired since they've come into the land, some figures of pagan worship. It represents a double-mindedness, a kind of restless indecision.

Joshua's own life represents a wonderful contrast to the unwillingness of many Israelites to make the defining choice to follow Yahweh wholeheartedly. He has earned the right to be heard on this important issue of choice.

Now he stands up before the entire assembled nation here in the valley of Shechem between Mount Ebal and Mount Ger'izim, near Jacob's well. And he reviews the heart of God's covenant love relationship with his people, calling to decision, a decision for the Lord.

The majority of the people stayed true to their faith, because in chapter 23 they're commended for faithfulness, loyalty, and consistency in relationship to God. But Joshua has observed that there are some in the nation who have embraced idolatry. If you survey the whole history of the people of Israel, you see that they are consistently drawn back to the idols of their forefathers, generation after generation.

We need to hear Joshua's challenge. Thank goodness God periodically raises up men and women like Joshua

to stand before us and confront us: "Do you know who you are in relationship to God? Have you made a choice? If not, then choose right now, today, whom you're going to be sold out to." It's an imperative. Each of us needs to seriously hear it. What we're called to do is examine our own relationship with Jesus Christ. Have you wholeheartedly made that choice, and are you absolutely convinced in the choice? Perhaps, if you're very honest with yourself, you'll say, "I'm really caught in indecision. I'm faced with so much input, so many spiritual and emotional choices, that at times I do get confused about who I am in relationship to God."

That indecision is confronted for us today in the person and work of Jesus Christ, our savior and Lord. We are called to repentance of our sinful rebellion against Him. The promise is new life, spiritual transformation - the reality of being born again to eternal life.

Making a decision for Christ involves confession of our need for a savior, the willingness to accept Christ's saving work on the cross in delivering us from guilt and condemnation, and experiencing His forgiveness.

Checking out the choices

Joshua wants to help these people make an informed choice. He says, "If you're unsure, then think through the options and decide what you're going to do." He is not being rhetorical. He wants these people to have a reasoned, thoughtful process of making this decision. In the second half of verse 15, he's saying, "If you want, you could go back to the Mesopotamian gods of Terah and Abram." The children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren of Abraham and Sarah flirted with those gods of the Chaldeans. That idolatry was always there as an option for them.

He says they could return to the Egyptian gods. In one sense, the gods of Egypt are the most attractive, because the Israelites lived in Egypt for four hundred years when it was at the height of its power in the world aesthetically, culturally, economically, and militarily. It was an impressive place to live. Today we are still fascinated by the history of the ancient kingdoms of the pharaohs. There is even an interest in some sort of cultic or supernatural power of the pyramids. In that sense, the gods of Egypt are still attractive in our day and age.

He says they could choose the current Canaanite gods. The people of Israel struggled with their attraction to the fertility gods of the Canaanites their entire history in the land. Those places of worship were sensual, emotionally fulfilling, and attractive. In contrast, the worship of *Yahweh* was word-oriented, austere, and serious.

Joshua contrasts these gods of the Chaldeans, Egyptians, and Canaanites with their covenant God. "The LORD" is really *Yahweh*, which is his relational, self-disclosing name. It's the name he used to introduce himself to Moses and to the people, saying, "I AM WHO I AM." He is a God who is involved with them, who is for them. He is also identified in verse 2 as "the God of Israel." In Hebrew this is the name *Elohim*, which is the broadest name for divinity. But he is not impersonal divinity; he is divinity who is committed to a people. He identifies himself as a God of relationship, a personal leader, who has revealed Himself.

Then Joshua lists the specific ways that God has interacted with his called-out people, the Jews, through the centuries. We're going to see in the next message that Joshua is 110 years old when he gives this sermon, but he hasn't forgotten his history. I respect someone who knows history, because you learn lessons about today by understanding the patterns of the past. There at Shechem he recites this history for everyone to hear.

Let me take you through verses 2-13 again, highlighting all the actions God took for his people. God says, starting in verse 2, "I *took* your father Abraham from beyond the river. I *led* him through all the land of Canaan, I *made* his offspring many. I *gave* him Isaac. To Isaac, I *gave* Jacob and Esau. I *sent* Moses and Aaron. I *plagued* Egypt. I *brought* your fathers out of Egypt." When the Jews cried out to the Lord, he *put* darkness between Israel and the Egyptians. He *made* the sea come and cover them. He continues, "I *brought* you to the land of the Amorites east of the Jordan. They fought with you, and I *gave* them into your hands. And I *destroyed* them before you. I *delivered* you out of the hand of Balaam. I *gave* the seven nations of Canaan into your hand. And I *sent* the hornet that helped you, the panic that preceded your conquest. I *gave* you a land on which you had not labored, and cities which you had not built. And now you dwell in this land

and you eat the fruit of the vineyards and olive trees that you didn't plant."

If you lay Ephesians 2:1-10 side-by-side with this salvation history, you see that it is characterized by the same passion and the same remembering of what God did. In it the apostle Paul traces our individual salvation history. The God of creation loved us from the very beginning. He initiated relationship with us while we were dead; we couldn't change anything about ourselves. We were captives of satanic evil, in bondage, as Israel was in bondage in Egypt. And God reached down to us in love, becoming a man in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus walked among us, teaching us how to live, setting a perfect personal example. But God knew that we were incapable of responding to Jesus. We wanted to be like him but there was nothing in us that could make that possible, because we were dead, sinful, rebelling against him. That is why he had to go to the cross and take on himself our sin in his own body, bearing it, dying with it, and being buried with it. Then we were raised with Jesus to newness of life, which conquered sin in our lives and took away the fear of death. The Lord Jesus Christ, having promised his Holy Spirit, ascended into heaven, and now has come into our lives in all the fullness of his spiritual power. He is creating good works in us. The faithfulness that he calls us to, he is accomplishing in us. That is our salvation history.

We have the historical facts in Joshua 24:2-13. We have the salvation history of men and women in Jesus Christ - of what He has done in their lives to deliver them, provide for them, and give them fullness of life. It is against that backdrop that we are called to make a choice. In verse 14 we are urged to fear God, to stand in awe of his saving power and activity. We're called to serve him with sincerity and with faithfulness. Sincerity has to do with our motives for what we're doing. Faithfulness has to do with lifestyle, follow-through, consistency in living for him throughout all of our life.

Verses fourteen and fifteen call us to renounce idolatry in our own lives. Are you getting weary of this repetition about the issue of idolatry through the book of Joshua? We seem to be talking about it in every message. Why do you think that is? It's because we're idolaters. We have the same idolatrous attractions that the people of Israel did all around us: religions, relationships, things that we will grasp to give us security and stability and protection and meaning in life. It may be the idol of a spouse, family, our country, our career, athletic ability, education, technology (our generation blindly believes that computers and the Internet are going to bring peace to the world, but it isn't true). It may be the idol of pleasure-we work hard so we have the right to play hard. It may be the idol of money, which is just a symbol of security and protection. Whatever it is that so mesmerizes us, we are called by Joshua to put it away, to call it what it is and repent of it.

God is calling us to look again at the person and work of Jesus Christ, and ask ourselves, "Have I chosen to follow him totally, completely, wholeheartedly?"

A right response to God

We're going to come back to this issue of personal choice in a moment, but to help us see how we should respond, let's look at the response of the people of Israel in verses 16-28. It's a response of love, repentance, and loyalty. Verses 16-18:

Then the people answered, "Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD, to serve other gods; for it is the LORD our God who brought us and our fathers up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage, and who did those great signs in our sight, and preserved us in all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed; and the LORD drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land; therefore we also will serve the LORD, for he is our God."

The people assure Joshua that they do want to respond to the Lord with faithfulness and loyalty to him only. The reasons they give in these verses show that they have been listening closely to Joshua's message. (By the way, it's wonderful for a preacher when people listen to what he says. When people come up and talk to me about something in the text that struck them or that they were wrestling with, I know they listened to the text and heard God speak to them. That warms my heart. So I'm sure Joshua was thrilled that they paid attention.) And like Joshua and his family, the people confess their faith in God.

If I were in Joshua's place and this wonderful momentum were building as I heard the people saying, "Yes, we want to follow the Lord, you're right," I would want to affirm that, to help them move forward in this process of decision. But Joshua's response is startling in verses 19-20:

But Joshua said to the people, "You cannot serve the LORD; for he is a holy God; he is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins. If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm, and consume you, after having done you good."

Why would he want to throw cold water on the wonderful enthusiasm of the people? But Joshua understands that it's easy for people to promise obedience to the Lord, but it's something else to actually follow through. I think his stern words, an overstatement if you will, are meant to curb their overconfidence and make them look honestly at their own hearts. It's a warning against easy-believism and cheap grace. He's saying, "Don't make this decision lightly. Understand what's involved."

He also wants to make the point that this is not about religious reformation. This is about spiritual transformation. When he says, "You can't do these things," the point is that God himself is the only one who can do them. God transforms us from the inside out. We don't reform ourselves, we don't just try harder to be good people and love God. We trust God to begin this work of change in us from the inside, and then it works itself out. That's what Joshua wants them to stop and think about.

But they respond in faith in verse 21:

And the people said to Joshua, "Nay; but we will serve the LORD."

Then in verses 22-28 Joshua leads the nation in an oath of loyalty to the Lord, a covenant ceremony renewing this love relationship. It's a beautiful time of worship together as a spiritual family.

Then Joshua said to the people, "You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen the LORD, to serve him." And they said, "We are witnesses." He said, "Then put away the foreign gods which are among you, and incline your heart to the LORD, the God of Israel." And the people said to Joshua, "The LORD our God we will serve, and his voice we will obey." So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and made statutes and ordinances for them at Shechem. And Joshua wrote these words in the book of the law of God; and he took a great stone, and set it up there under the oak in the sanctuary of the LORD. And Joshua said to all the people, "Behold, this stone shall be a witness against us; for it has heard all the words of the LORD which he spoke to us; therefore it shall be a witness against you, lest you deal falsely with your God." So Joshua sent the people away, every man to his inheritance.

Three times in this section the people affirm their desire to serve only the Lord, and Joshua takes them at their word. He doesn't over-analyze these confessions of faith. But so they won't forget this solemn covenant with the Lord, Joshua writes it out in a book. And then he sets up a large stone as a permanent witness to their wholehearted agreement before the Lord, and as a reminder to never go back on this commitment that they have made to their loving heavenly Father.

When God gives me the privilege of praying with someone who comes into personal faith in Jesus Christ, one of the things I love to do is give them a parchment document that has the date and the time that they invited Christ into their lives. I ask them to put it in their Bible and keep it as a memorial, much like the memorials that this great stone and this book of the law represent. The people will remember what they entered into with God. They can look back and say, "Yes, a change took place in me, and God was part of it."

The decision to follow Christ

This scene at Shechem offers a great opportunity for each one of us to re-examine our own commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. I am grateful to John Huffman for his listing of four aspects of accepting God's plan of salvation in his commentary *Joshua, Mastering The Old Testament*. Word Publishing, 1986,

pp. 272-274. These are important parts of any legitimate, wholehearted decision to invite Christ into one's life and give Him total control:

You must be willing to quit straddling the fence.

You must be willing to exert influence on other people instead of being pushed around by them.

You must not make a decision for Christ lightly.

You must be willing to go public with your faith.

The operative word in each is being *willing* -willing, that is, for God to be a part of the process. Let me amplify them briefly.

First, you must be willing to quit straddling the fence. It is easy to live indecisively, always investigating the claims of Christ, always seeking but never taking that vital step of faith in Him. Now, I know there must be sincere examination of the gospel before you commit your life to Christ.

When I was doing college ministry, I never struggled with someone who wanted to honestly talk about other religions and how they compared and contrasted with Christianity. I don't think we should be impatient with that. They need to go through the process of seriously examining the alternatives. But it's tragic when people never get beyond the point of investigation. What's appropriate for collegians is inappropriate for people in their middle years who have had everything laid out. Choice is inescapable.

Second, you have to be willing to exert influence on others instead of being pushed around by them. The Israelites were influenced by the pagan culture around them. They weren't agents for change among the people of the land they came into.

When Israel came into the land, they had the book of the law, the first five books of Moses. That was their Bible. God commanded them to live by it. It was non-negotiable. But what they tried to do was blend a bit of Canaanite religion with a bit of Bible religion. You can't afford to live like that.

Joshua, in contrast, was not a victim of this kind of spiritual indecision. He was willing to stand against the tide of Canaanite religious influence, personally resisting its influence. He always lived as a change agent before the nation of Israel. He spoke out, saying, "Think about what you're doing. I know what I'm doing and why I'm doing it. You are accountable before the Lord."

Third, you must not make a decision for Christ lightly. Joshua had fought many a battle; he understood the cost of discipleship. He was committed to a lifestyle of warfare against satanic forces of sin and death and hell. He had not made his choice to follow the Lord superficially. Jesus said, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me" (Luke 9:23). Joshua was a man of spiritual perseverance.

Following Christ is the most exciting thing in the world. I have never been bored in the years since I gave my life to Christ in college. But following Christ is not easy or comfortable. There are costs, demands made on you. You have to understand that fact ahead of going into it. The choice is not about what other people think; it can't be made to please your family or your boyfriend or your peer group. Don't make a decision because of what your friends have done. Make certain it's your choice and yours alone to commit yourself to Jesus Christ.

Fourth, you must be willing to go public with your faith. Joshua did, didn't he? We are not called to secret-service Christianity. Jesus calls us to be willing to speak out for Him, to tell others of His life changing intervention. Going public with our faith is a wonderful overflow of His life changing power and presence in us. It's simply a matter of sharing the difference He has made in our experience.

The call is for you to give your all to Jesus Christ throughout your whole life, beginning right now. What it means practically is that we allow him to be the Lord. We don't know all that it may mean, but we're willing to say, "Jesus, take over, I'm not doing well at this. Please run my life, and I'll learn to listen to you, trust you, and follow you, whatever that means as the years unfold."

I understand that the choice to follow Christ is not an easy one, but I urge you, if you need to make a decision for Jesus Christ, make it now. I beg you not to put it off any longer. Joshua said, "Choose this day, right now." It's a matter of life and death. It will be the Holy Spirit of God who brings you to a place of responsiveness to Jesus Christ, not what I say. But if the Spirit is at work in your heart, urging you to make a decision, then do it now. Think it through thoughtfully, but make a decision.

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