

IT'S YOUR CHOICE: FORSAKE HIM OR SERVE HIM

Joshua 24:14-18 • 2021-08-29



I find it interesting when an Olympic athlete chooses to compete for another country from the one which they have spent most of their lives and training in. It's not uncommon. An athlete who grew up benefiting from the training facilities and coaches of their nation might decide they would like to compete for a different nation at the Olympics. I wonder why they do. It might be for a family or childhood connection or just for a better chance to compete. Ultimately, those who have the option to change nations can't choose to compete for two nations. They must choose which one and stick with it. I'm sure it's not always an easy choice to make. Maybe sometimes the nation they left might even feel a little betrayed. But that's the way it works. Some decisions just cannot be a "both and" but must be an "either or."

That's true regarding our life of faith. Serving the Lord isn't a decision that can be made halfheartedly. You cannot say, "I'll give it a try and keep my options open as I serve other gods." Either you serve the Lord, or you forsake him. There is no other option. There is only one God, and all other choices are to forsake the one true God. For believers it should be an easy decision to make. But we need to understand that isn't a decision we can make halfway. We see just how true that is as we look at Joshua 24 today. God presents a choice to the people of Israel. The leader and prophet Joshua poses a question to them. And his words apply to us today as well. "Whom will you serve?" he asks.

Firstly, let's keep this much clear: Joshua wasn't asking the people to become believers. This wasn't a call to "make your decision for Christ." You can't choose to become a citizen of any nation you want. Likewise, you cannot choose to become a citizen of God's holy kingdom. Unless God in mercy draws us from unbelief and calls us to faith in him, we remain citizens of this world and outside his kingdom. By nature, we are enemies of God, dead in sin, and lost. It is only through God's mercy that we become members of his kingdom. He called you to faith. He made you his own. And the Scriptures make clear that even faith is a gift of God (Eph 2:8-9). Our new birth and new status as members of his kingdom comes by the Holy Spirit's working through the gospel to create light and life in us. Thank God for that! Besides that Joshua is speaking to a group of leaders of Israel who already knew the Lord as their God. They had already been brought to faith and rescued by God.

But a believer brought to faith can make a choice. They can choose to turn away and forsake the Lord. So, Joshua posed an important decision to these ancient believers: "Choose today whomever you will *serve*." It was not a decision to believe in the Lord. *It was a call to believers to be faithful to him and to serve him.* When it came to *servicing* God there was now a choice to be made. Joshua's call: "Make up your mind; state your choice."

This is something we might do for a youth's confirmation or when an adult joins a church. They get to express their faith in their Savior God and share their desire to serve the Lord. It's an affirmation of what God has done. This was the perfect time for the Israelites to express their loyalty to their God. The Lord had rescued the people of Israel, a nation of about 2 million, from slavery in Egypt. Then after 40 years in the barren wilderness he brought them into the land of Canaan. For seven years the Lord blessed them with victory over the people of Canaan. Joshua had led them with the hand of the Lord giving them miraculous victories time and again. Now, as Joshua is getting old and near death, the people meet at Shechem. Even as this battle-worn man, old and well advanced in years neared the age of 110 he continued to lead the people. The physical battles were long over and won. But there remained another war-front: the hearts of the people. How will they proceed as they live with their newly won land and freedom? How will they go about their lives as free people in a rich land? Now Joshua says, is the time to make clear their choice.

Joshua presents the options to them. "*Now, therefore, fear the LORD and serve him wholeheartedly and faithfully. Remove the gods that your fathers served in the region across the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD.*" Option one: fear and serve the Lord wholeheartedly and faithfully. Get rid of all other false gods. If they wanted to take this option, it meant *complete faithfulness* to him. There was no room for serving the Lord and a false god. Then Joshua shared option two: "*But if you see no benefit in serving the LORD, then choose for yourselves today whomever you will serve—whether the gods that your fathers served beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living.*" Option two was wide open. If you don't want to serve the Lord, then pick some other god. They are all the same. It didn't matter whether it was the false gods of their ancestors or the false gods of this new land. Their ancestors worshiped images of wood and stone. The gods they mingled with in Egypt worshiped nature and beasts. The gods in the land of the Amorites worshiped human sexuality. *Serve the LORD or serve them?*

Have you ever had trouble just deciding something? When we choose things like which house to buy, which job to take, or which car to buy we often can't decide right away. We even see many TV game shows all based on that human trait. "Which one will he or she decide on." "Deal or no Deal?" "Door number one or door number two?" But this isn't one of those difficult decisions! This was a no-brainer decision for the people! Joshua isn't even presenting real and valid options. His comment about serving the Lord as possibly seeming no good to them is meant to cut and stab at them. It is sarcastic. *The people knew in their minds what the right choice was.*

Joshua took the first step "As for me and my household—we will serve the Lord!" His confession is repeated a lot in Christian homes. It adorns photos, pillowcases, and wall hangings. Joshua might have said this as a bold leap of faith. It may have been a pastoral move in setting the example for others. But I can't help but see it almost with a little comedy or irony. I hear him saying it like this: "I don't know about you guys, but I'm with him." And I can imagine the decision isn't any more difficult for you today. If I were to ask, "Who will you serve in your life, the Lord God or some other god?" I know none here would hesitate to answer. We know the Lord has defeated our enemies and crushed Satan, we know he has risen to life, we know he is the eternal and almighty God. "I will serve the Lord."

No, this is not a difficult decision for a believer to make, but it is a hard one to put into practice. To what extent are you choosing to serve him in your life? "Wholeheartedly and faithfully," Joshua says. Were the Israelites ready to serve the Lord in *complete faithfulness*? Ready to cast aside all other gods? They couldn't settle for a half-way service. He knew the people still had divided hearts. He knew that some of them still held tight to foreign gods. He knew he still had to remind them that to serve the Lord faithfully means to toss out all other gods you might serve.

What about us? We can easily enough make this choice and we do indeed desire to carry it out. God has called us into his kingdom just as he called the ancient Israelites. We know him. We know his rescue for us. Because of our faith in him we want to serve him. But is that choice to serve God always carried out with wholehearted service and in complete faithfulness? "Of course, pastor, I don't have any false idols in my home that I need to toss in the trash." Thank God if you don't. But does every decision put him first? Does his Word stand over all others? Whom do you serve if you are put on the spot to share what the Lord says about the gift of marriage? Whom do you serve when someone close to you indicates they serve the culture around them and its beliefs? Is a believer still serving the Lord if they are starting to look for truth in a horoscope? And is he or she serving in *all faithfulness* if he or she even turns to the godless and Satanic fun of what you find on so many movies and shows today? Or answer for yourself this question, "Am I serving the Lord wholeheartedly, or just as I find it easy and some of the time? Am I still serving the Lord if it is part-time service? Am I still serving the Lord wholeheartedly if I don't remove from my heart everything, activity, or person who takes over a portion of my heart from the love of God?"

The elders and leaders of the people responded: "*Far be it from us to forsake the Lord in order to serve other gods! For the Lord our God. ...We will serve the Lord because he is our God!*" **Their creed is like our creed: A God who has saved us—this is the one we will serve.** We were not wholeheartedly serving or faithful. But he is a wholehearted and faithful Savior God! He sent his only Son to this world. His Son Jesus chose with all his heart to fulfill the Father's plan to rescue us. He faithfully lived and died on the cross for our sins. He rose to life and freed us from sin's slavery and punishment. The first eyewitnesses saw Jesus risen, his battle won, the victory over death which is our victory. He defeated our enemy, the devil. He sent the Spirit into our hearts. We know what our God has done to rescue us. God himself fought the battle. And he will keep us safe until he calls us to be with him forever.

Believers across the pages of history have followed Joshua's confession of faith. We read earlier about a sad time in Jesus' ministry when many of his disciples began to forsake him. Jesus asked his disciples who they wanted to follow. Peter spoke up on behalf of them all "*To who else will we go? You have the Words of eternal life.*" They followed Jesus because he is their Savior God. The choice was easy. And it was empowered by the gospel message of Christ.

And all of us who are spiritual heads need to recognize what Joshua did. If God has given you a family, he wants you to lead by your confession and your example. Joshua didn't just say, "I will serve the Lord." He spoke on behalf of his entire household. And he invited others to join with him in his confession of faith. And don't think that you can only say this for your family when they are young. Joshua was now nearly 110 years old. Yet he spoke. And the elders and leaders of the people spoke on behalf of their families. Make your confession clear. Invite others to make their confession clear. Don't let them become half-hearted. Don't let it just be a saying on the wall or a pillowcase.

First examine your own life. Then make your confession clear. "We will serve the Lord." If you have a Christian family then you have the same opportunity to lead by example and to speak up. If your Christian child or grandchild is beginning to serve other gods and not serve the Lord wholeheartedly, or if you know of a niece or nephew who has the gospel and is beginning to forsake the Lord, don't hesitate to speak up. Present them with this challenge. "Whom will you serve?" Like Joshua, remind them of all the things which the Lord their God has done for them to make them free and blessed. Remind them of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Remind them of how God promises life eternal. Point to the failed false gods of this dying age. Let them make a clear confession "I will serve the Lord." If you belong to a body of believers, continue to confess your faith, and encourage others through the gospel. It isn't just something to speak on your confirmation day. It is a life-long confession to hold faithfully.

The people gathered at Shechem over 3400 years ago *repeated with conviction their decision three times.* It wasn't fear that drove them, it wasn't an emotional hysteria, or mob action of the-moment. It was a rooted confession in a God who was their Savior-God. Joshua wanted them to remember this decision because it was based on the gospel! Remember your own confession and let others hear it. "We will serve the Lord our God."