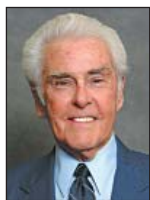


God calls believers to step forward for him



John Howell

In Joshua 24:1-13, Joshua gave the people of Israel a history lesson of God's leadership from before moving to Egypt to Moses' leading them toward the Promised Land. Joshua had assumed responsibility for the children of Israel as they gathered on the brink of moving into the land God had promised Abraham so many years before. Under Joshua's leadership, Israel entered Canaan and slowly took control of what was to be their homeland. In his final act of public leadership as recorded in Scripture, Joshua challenged the nation to choose decisively whether they would follow the God of Israel or other gods.

Make a national and family commitment to Yahweh (vv. 14-18). Joshua had gathered all the tribes to Shechem along with the elders, judges and officers of Israel to hear his final speech (v. 1). After reviewing their history with Yahweh, he demanded that they "fear the Lord and serve him in sincerity and truth." They were to put away the gods their fathers had served in Egypt and "serve the Lord."

Joshua confronted them with a choice that had to be made. They could not vacillate in their commitment to the Lord but had to make a definite choice. Then he declared, "[B]ut as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord" (v. 15).

In his challenge to Israel, Joshua tantalized them by declaring, "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 sins" (v. 19). The people

rejected Joshua's judgment by affirming that "we will serve the Lord our God and we will obey his voice" (v. 24).

In many ways, our own country is faced with similar choices in its commitment and obedience to the Lord. Statistics depict an increasing number of people who are turning away from Christian faith. The U.S. Postal Service delivers letters from individuals to family and friends, maintaining that serving God is becoming more difficult in the military, in business and in public service because (the letter writers say), the American public and social leadership oppose the open display of Christian faith.

In addition, the impact of Islamic extremism is opposed to all other religions, even though many followers of Islam support constitutional freedom of religion and respect it.

Joshua's call for national and family commitment to the Lord is relevant to our own times.

Remind those whom we can contact what God has done for them (vv. 19-23). Joshua intended that the sons of Israel remember how God had been with them throughout their journey to Canaan. Now is also a time for us to reflect on God's presence with us in our victories over circumstances and in times of despair and crisis.

As I wrote this lesson on June 19, two events were central in the public and religious press. Our nation celebrated Juneteenth, recognizing the end of slavery in the United States with the adoption of the Emancipation Proclamation 150 years ago. Even

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July 12, 2015

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with all the difficulties that have continued to face the nation with regard to race, this was a tremendous step forward.

Unfortunately, however, other press focused on the murder of nine members of Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, S.C. The alleged killer is a 21-year-old white man who joined an all-black Bible study group at the church for an hour before pulling out his gun and murdering people in defense of white supremacy.

One consequence of this tragedy is that members of racial and religious groups have taken stronger stands against terrorist violence in our own country. Kansas City Star columnist Renee Osterheldt wrote on June 19, "Or why people won't readily call this shooting what it is: an act of domestic terrorism. It's more than a hate crime." When guns are readily available, emotionally deranged terrorists use them tragically.

Joshua's covenant with the people (vv. 24-26). After the people had reaffirmed their commitment to the Lord, Joshua wrote a covenant that included their words and placed it in the book of the law of God. To give them a visual reminder of their covenant, he "took a large stone and set it up there under the oak that was by the sanctuary of the Lord." The stone would "be for a witness against you, lest you deny your God" (vv. 25-28).

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