

We Will Serve the Lord

In his grueling forty days of wilderness temptation, Jesus was offered the world and all its glory by the devil. His answer defines his life and offers us the perfect example: “Begone, Satan! For it is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God, and serve Him only.’”



Michael K. Olmsted

(Matthew 4:10).

Life is defined by desires, values, experiences, and loyalties. From childhood we first learn values and behavior from our family; later, circumstances and other people impact our thinking. We make choices, just as Israel was confronted by their future and Jesus was challenged by the devil. Our text recounts the conclusion of Joshua’s leadership as he calls Israel to honestly and carefully renew their commitment to God.

Joshua points the people to the powerful history of God’s promises and miracles because human beings forget, become lazy, and rewrite the rules of living for selfish goals. So Joshua offers a refresher course about God’s love and miraculous answers to prayer that brought them to nationhood in a beautiful land. He goes all the way back to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the bitter years of slavery in Egypt, the exodus to freedom under Moses leadership, their victories against the inhabitants of Canaanite lands, and now their status as a free people with a bright future in this “land of milk and honey.”

Who they have become and what they possess are God’s gifts, as is the future. It is, as always, God’s grace at work: “I gave you land on which you had not labored, and towns you had not built, and you live in them; you eat the fruit of vineyards and olive gardens you did not plant” (v. 13).

The challenge is to put away all false gods and serve the Lord God with an undivided heart (v. 14). We know what happened. The cultural matrix of pagan gods, both from memories

of Egypt and daily exposure to the practices of their close neighbors, continued to influence God’s people. Such tragic influences continue in our day, in our flawed social standards, a grotesque blending of religion and politics, the popularity of a prosperity gospel, and a mix of religions from many cultures. Our world is very much like the world that surrounded Israel in Joshua’s day. But we can learn from their mistakes and make better choices.

Joshua was urging Israel to reaffirm their covenant with God as they prepare for a future that will not always be easy. The biblical concept of covenant is a binding relationship of mutual obligation, a commitment of trust between two parties. Israel had the testimony of the past and the promises of God, but they never quite gave up the pagan gods of their world, and their laxity ultimately resulted in tragedy. Moving away from God is not one isolated decision, it is a process of convenient forgetfulness and compromise. Joshua does not mince words: “Now, if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are now living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord” (v. 15).

On that day Israel made their choice: “Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods” (v. 16). Israel had clear reason to declare their faithfulness that day, but faith that hangs on past history alone is too easily compromised by present circumstances. Israel’s history is a varied story of failures and victories, of tragedy and blessings, as they experienced spiritual amnesia, returned to God, and failed to remember lessons learned. In spite of the captivating stories of the Hebrew Scriptures, the laws, prophets and promises, Israel forgot to study God’s faithfulness and promised redemption.

We often make the mistake of seeing

Israel defined by law keeping and rituals. Behind all those legalistic texts and rituals there is a clear foundation of God’s love and grace. Faith in God is experienced as we freely choose to believe and love God back. Living as a child of God, as a Christian, is accomplished one step at a time, choosing every day, learning what you should do and say as a follower of Jesus. Such living requires that we do what Joshua is telling his people to do: go back to the history of God’s love, the stories of his generosity and faithfulness, the power of his forgiveness, and the promises of God that are ours.

What do you remember from your journey of faith? What or who did God use to communicate his love to you? Did God promise you a life of unbroken happiness and prosperity? Or did God promise to love you and be with you even in the darkest times? Is God more like a fairy godmother or a loving companion who is with you no matter what?

What about your faithfulness? Jesus never talked about the proper amount of money you should give to a temple, church, or charity. He never spoke of attendance records or awards for leadership. Jesus spoke of compassion, forgiveness, generosity, care for the outcasts or those who are different. To love God is to love others. To serve God is to serve others. When God is at the center of your devotion, your life takes on a whole new character.

I wonder if some in the crowd Joshua addressed that day were still thinking “the more I give or do, the more I will get.” Serving God is not about getting; it’s about choosing to seek God wherever you are, making the hard choices, asking God’s Spirit to shape and bless you, putting others first, and staying the course. Serving the Lord is a learning experience that continues for a lifetime and blesses others along the way.