

Choosing to Obey the Lord in Our Lives

“As for me, and my house, we will serve the Lord.” (Joshua 24:15)

So Many Choices

Life is full of choices. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise. After all, we are not robots, whom our controllers turn on and off, or direct by remote control; or slaves who are owned by others and are not permitted free will.

One of the basic tenets of the Bible is that (since Creation) we all get to exercise ultimate choices that determine the kind of people we become and the way we approach the great issues of life. We are not granted the right to opt out of personal responsibility, or to attribute all our decisions to DNA, or to the caprice of divine determinism (as some religions teach). God sees into our hearts and expects us to choose to put Him and His ways first, as an act of our will.

The Old Ways or God's Way – Israel's Choice

The passage from which the declaration at the head of this article is taken describes the nation of Israel at a cross road. After wandering in the wilderness for forty years, their great leader and Lawgiver Moses had died and leadership of the people had transitioned to Joshua, one of only two men who had been part of the great Exodus from slavery in Egypt. Together they had crossed the Jordan River and claimed the land God promised them. This throng of former slaves with little military experience had seen His miraculous power, protecting, guiding, providing, correcting and giving them victory over all their enemies. They seemed unstoppable as they moved forward and established a new nation that was the envy of their neighbours.

But now they were at a cross-road. Joshua was an old man. His generation had mostly passed on and he did not have long to live. The question was: would the people be faithful to God or would they fall into the lifestyle patterns of the pagan societies that surrounded them? Their forefathers had grown up in pagan Babylon and Egypt, where astrology, idolatry, images of gold, silver, stone and wood and belief systems based on fear dominated people's lives. On one level their long-term inheritance was rooted in the religious systems of most of their ancestors. But they were neither obliged nor pre-destined to go down that path.

Realising that his time was short, Joshua called the tribal leaders of Israel from all corners of the land. After cataloguing the events that led to their current situation (Joshua 24:1-14) he threw down the gauntlet. Which God, or gods, would they serve? Whose values would prevail? Did they want God's blessing and guidance above all else, or would they compromise and settle for second best? One thing was certain: irrespective of how the tribes chose, Joshua was determined that he and his family would serve only the Lord. There was no middle path, no room for compromise.

For Joshua, the choice was an easy one. He had been born in the land of Egypt, where the Children of Israel had lived (much of that time as slaves) for nearly 430

years. As he grew up, he personally witnessed the vile misery and oppression under which the Hebrews laboured. He knew from personal experience what happened when an empire was dominated by idols, pagan priests, injustice, superstition, fear, cruelty, disregard for the sanctity of human life, and slavery. (Daily life for Hebrews under the ancient Pharaohs was far worse than that depicted in the Disney movie "Prince of Egypt"). Having walked out of Egypt and through the Red Sea on his own two feet; having seen the power of God's might break the cruelty of Pharaoh; having tasted forty years of freedom (which should have been a few days only, had the people not promptly rebelled against God in the wilderness, and hankered to return to the oppression from which they had just been liberated), he had no intention of returning to the ways of Egypt. Had not God Himself said, "I brought you out of the land of slavery" (Exodus 20:2)?

The problem, as many have since observed, was that while the Israelites had left Egypt, the ways of Egypt were still entrenched in their hearts; getting "Egypt" out of them was an ongoing challenge.

Tragically, the generation that had experienced the Exodus had begun to settle for second best. Turning their backs on God they slowly embraced the belief systems of the Canaanite tribes in whose land they now dwelt. There was a very real threat they would become just like the Canaanites. God had called them to a way of holiness, a people who would belong to Him alone, however many had inter-married and bowed before gods they could see and hold, rather than remain faithful to Him who was invisible (Hebrews 11:27). As a consequence, they permitted the idols and shrines of the Baals and other local deities to remain, at first in parallel with worship of Jehovah, and later on in place of Him altogether. While they paid lip service to God they drifted into egregious idolatry. On many occasions it was the priests and civic leaders who led the way.

Now came the critical moment. Joshua had seen the judgement of God on paganism, and the ever-present threat that the ways of the Canaanites would wind themselves around the hearts and appetites of the Israelites. He had heard the commitment of Jehovah to bless those who served Him. He had heard the Lord promise that His presence would go with Israel, that he would give them victory over their enemies and that they would rest in Him, in a relationship unique in history (Leviticus 22:31-33). This was what Joshua wanted above everything else, for the nation he led. But the people had to make the same choice, down to the individual level. Every village leader, every father and mother, every teenager, had to make a decision, with their will, as to whom they would follow.

The story finishes with the people committing, along with Joshua, to put the Lord first.

"We will serve God too." (Joshua 24:16)

This commitment (understandable at the time, given their circumstances) would be critically tested. Not by external threats. Not by cataclysmic events, such as invasions by their enemies or by natural disasters, but by the slow process of reinforcing or eroding belief on a daily basis. That is how belief is strengthened or destroyed.

Finally, Joshua died. The majority of Israel initially kept faith with God, but the next generation slid hopelessly into idolatry.

“The people served the Lord throughout the lifetime of Joshua and of the elders who outlived him and who had seen all the great things the Lord had done for Israel. After that whole generation had been gathered to their fathers (died), another generation grew up, who knew neither the Lord nor what He had done for Israel. Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord and served the Baals. They forsook the Lord, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of Egypt. They followed and worshipped various gods of the peoples around them.” (Judges 2:7, 10-12)

This propensity to choose evil over good defined most of Israel’s subsequent history (even if some genuinely celebrated God’s goodness and followed His ways, cf Psalm 44).

Centuries later the prophet Elijah was still challenging Israel to serve God, not the false god Baal. “‘How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal is God follow him.’ But the people said nothing.” (1 Kings 18:21). Only when fire fell from heaven did they fall on their knees and acknowledge, “The Lord - He is God (1 Kings 18:39).

Submitting to God (or giving the appearance of doing so) out of peer pressure, sentimentality or fear of judgement will never produce long term change. Only hearts to have been made right by the Spirit of God will experience the motivation to love and obey him for His own sake: “I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart” (Hebrews 40:8). Obedience starts not with hasty promises or flaky resolutions, but in the heart.

Our Turn to Choose

The underlying choices that faced Israel thousands of years ago are ours today. Of course, we no longer live in a society littered with the temples and crude statuary of man-made gods and goddesses – or do we? Our gods are materialism; Western values that have had faith and Biblical theology stripped from them; selfishness; immorality; and new forms of idolatry; world views that clash with the plan, values and purposes of God and end up excluding Him altogether.

“When the foundations are being destroyed, what can the righteous do?” (Psalm 11:3). One thing we can do, as Christians, is remain faithful to the spiritual foundations that underpin our personal faith in God and in Jesus Christ, to speak up on behalf of truth, to be committed to Him who has called us, even if everyone else takes the path of least resistance and surrenders faith and Biblical values because it is too hard to do otherwise. (It is hard to live exceptionally.)

Think about the choices. Is God real? Is His Word valid? Do we accord it any place in our lives? Will our world view bend to the character of God? Are the visible things around us, and the compulsion to gain them and call them our own, our trophies, more real than the Eternal God, in a so-called post-modernist, post-Christian liberal

world where almost anything goes and faith and belief are relegated with eccentrics to quiet corners along with other quaint relics of the past? Are God's expectations of our lives, commitment and obedience genuine? Does He have any "rights" over our lives? Amid the pressures we all face, to conform to common social denominators, to change our thinking and adopt the behaviour of the loudest voices of a new generation of godless unbelief, we have to choose. It often seems the only choice is to go along with what others are saying, but that thinking is wrong-headed. As individuals, as parents, as young people, the values we personally hold to be true will prevail in our lives and private and public philosophies. The way we live will be dictated by the things we allow, what we read and accept as true, how we spend our money, how we use our spare time, how we dream about the future, how we deal with crises, how we make important decisions. There is simply no middle path!

Every generation has had to face these choices.

In Joshua's day, the choices were stark. When God said, "your children belong to me", he expected parents to bring them up in His way. When tribal gods such as Molech said, "your children belong to me", they were placed on stone arms of statues and fed to fires as human sacrifices. That's what happens when society's values win over God's. No longer physical sacrifices (although the abortion holocaust is a powerful reminder of how abandoning God has eroded the sanctity of human life), but the souls of our children and children's children as well.

I suspect it is harder for young people today to decide for God's way than it was when I was a child, when going to Sunday School was common and religious instruction in schools in the West was accepted. When I was a child most churches taught that the Bible was God's word. Most preachers believed in God, as the creator and sustainer of life. There are so many cults and counter-faith movements today (including in some respectable traditional denominations) that seek to discredit genuine Christianity. Churches are under the spotlight as never before. We easily forget that they have hostile agendas that are inimical to the Gospel. In the face of unbelief (even in a secular age) our response must be an emphatic: "we will serve the Lord".

Making it Worthwhile

As Christians we are called to draw on the wisdom and power of God to pursue the "right way" in the kinds of choices we make.

Who determines your values and priorities? Who decides the way you should live? Either God is God, or He is not. Who provides the blueprint, the benchmarks for you? Who models the way you build your home and respond to external pressures? Not when you are "safely" at church, but when you are out in the "world", surrounded by non-Christians? If God is Lord, you need to review your thinking and priorities and examine how you can more clearly put Him first. You don't have to fulfil the expectations of your neighbours, your political leaders, your university professors, your social opinion makers. Never forget that there is a powerful enmity between the world and the Christian community and the two are irreconcilable (1 John 5:19). Never forget that it only takes a single generation for a community to transition from predominantly "Christian" to predominantly "pagan".

Let's make a decision today to live as though God is real and the Holy Spirit actually lives in our hearts. Let's pray as though He really listens. Let's confront the choices we make every day as though we believe He will give us the power to be Christian men and women of integrity. Let's make personal decisions as though we believe they matter to God, that His standards exist, that His Word is true, that His presence is over all the earth. Let's humbly seek His wisdom to know how to face the 21st century. Let's live as though God is trustworthy and that He is capable of preserving, strengthening and sustaining what we have committed to Him. Let's be prepared to be "unreasonable" as far as non-Christian values are concerned, but reasonable by Biblical standards. Let's live as though God and His word are good for every generation and apply to every generation, including those as yet unborn. Let's believe that the promises of God's word are true. If God is God, let's act as though His will really counts, that when He demands our allegiance He is worth obeying. Let's ensure that our children see that Jesus Christ is real to us and that He is worth following.

Join with Joshua and others like him, who have defied scepticism and backsliding throughout the ages, and boldly proclaim, "Come what may ... we will serve the Lord".