

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Ninth Sunday after Trinity, July 28, 2013

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 421, 422:1, 625, 416, 412.

Lessons: Joshua 24:1-31, Colossians 3:23-24, Matthew 4:8-10.

Sermon Text: Joshua 24:14-15.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

Joshua has reached the conclusion of his life. We are reading from his last sermon. In the previous chapter, we read that he had *"summoned all Israel--their elders, leaders, judges and officials--and said to them: 'I am old and well advanced in years.'"* (Joshua 23:2)

Then in the words just before our Old Testament lesson, Joshua told those assembled leaders: *"Now I am about to go the way of all the earth. You know with all your heart and soul that not one of all the good promises the LORD your God gave you has failed. Every promise has been fulfilled; not one has failed. But just as every good promise of the LORD your God has come true, so the LORD will bring on you all the evil he has threatened, until he has destroyed you from this good land he has given you. If you violate the covenant of the LORD your God, which he commanded you, and go and serve other gods and bow down to them, the Lord's anger will burn against you, and you will quickly perish from the good land he has given you."* (Joshua 23:14-16)

He has spent several chapters before our Old Testament lesson warning God's chosen people to follow the Lord God, the only true God.

God's people have entered the promised land. They have been given the land that the Lord has promised – almost all of it – but there are still parts of it from which the pagans need to be annihilated.

The most serious danger facing Israel involves the enemy nations that remain among them in Canaan. The threat is not so much political as spiritual. Association with these nations will mean contact with their gods, sacrifices and pagan practices. In the previous chapter Joshua exhorts Israel to stay clear of any hint of Canaanite worship. They are to hold fast to the Lord.

But new challenges face them. Well, really, they are not new choices. In a sense they were challenges they faced every day of their lives, just as we face the same choice every day of our lives. Today let's examine scripture as

JOSHUA PLACES A CHOICE BEFORE GOD'S PEOPLE

1. *"Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve."*
2. *"But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD."*

In this chapter, Joshua called the entire nation together for this sermon. Everything except the sending of the Savior that God has promised has been fulfilled. It has taken hundreds of years for Abraham's descendants to receive the land they had been promised. They had just spent more than 400 years in Egypt, most of it as slaves to the Egyptians, thinking at first that they were just temporary visitors and were there until the famine was ended.

God had made a covenant with Abraham and had repeated it many times. After they left Egypt, their sin, their stubbornness, their disobedience meant that it took 40 years of wandering in the wilderness to travel what might have been traveled in a matter of months.

The covenant concept is found throughout book of Joshua. The holy contract between the Lord and Israel is the only thing that makes this nation different from any other. If the covenant is violated, Israel can expect to be treated just like the Canaanites whom God has permitted them to destroy. God's special people will quickly perish from the good land the Lord has given. Joshua's words in the previous chapters call attention to God's covenant grace. They show that Israel's privileged position did not result from their own goodness. It came because God by grace chose them out of all the world's nations and covenanted with them for his saving purpose. The covenant must be guarded.

Now Joshua is placing a choice in front of them that affects that covenant. They can continue to serve the true God or they can choose to abandon him and serve other gods, which are really no gods.

In essence, Joshua is repeating the first commandment of God: "you shall have no other gods." ***"Now fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your forefathers worshiped beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD."***

When we remember Luther's explanation from the Small Catechism, "We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things" we think that we have a pretty good understanding of "love and trust". Love means to regard God as our highest treasure. Trust means to put all our confidence in him. But the word "fear" always needs a bit of explanation.

To fear the Lord means to stand in awe of him, to honor him, to give him allegiance. Fear can include trust, love and worship. Fear of the Lord in the case of his people is not the same as dread, as it is for the unbeliever. We think of fearing the Lord in the context of Psalm 130:4: ***"But with you there is forgiveness; therefore you are feared."*** Forgiveness produces quite the opposite of dread. To fear the Lord alone means that all idols, whether attitudes of the heart or tangible objects must be thrown away.

Together with the gods Israel's forefathers worshiped beyond the Euphrates River, Joshua now mentions gods that men served in Egypt. During the 400 years they spent in Egypt at least some Israelites must have bent to social pressure and bowed before some of the Egyptian gods. Remember the history of the golden calf in front of Mount Sinai? That surely shows the influence of Egyptian religion.

Joshua is not just talking about the idols, the statues, but he also demands throwing away all false gods of the heart, anything that keeps Israel from giving the Lord undivided worship and honor. In his sermon there are words that emphasize Israel's faithfulness at this time. That emphasis would seem strange if outward idolatry were now being practiced. God's people remembered the history of Achan taking some of the forbidden booty of Jericho in chapter 7. All Achan's family and all his possessions were killed and destroyed. We would expect the same fierce anger from God if outright worship of idols were going on now. And no discarding of physical idols seems to take place after Joshua's words.

Joshua was recognizing the choice that mankind's sinful human flesh would make. He was acknowledging that some people will not serve the Lord God.

"But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living."

Joshua is not advocating the decision theology of many preachers today when he says choose for yourselves. Modern decision theology claims that unconverted people have the power within themselves to choose the Lord and become believers. But sinful humanity has no such power of its own to turn from unbelief to faith in the Lord. That power comes from God. Scripture tells us that ***"no one can say, 'Jesus is Lord,' except by the Holy Spirit."*** (1 Corinthians 12:3)

Joshua is here calling for a choice from people who already own the gift of faith from the Lord. They can choose to abandon the Lord or, by the Spirit already given them, to confirm their God-given faith and renew the covenant he put in place. But if they reject the Lord, the only choice they can make is which worthless idol to follow and serve. The spiritually dead can only make deadly choices

The end of verse 15 is one of the best-known statements of the entire Bible, at least to Christians: ***"But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD."***

Joshua's words are a bold and unashamed statement of personal commitment to the Lord even if he has to stand alone. He will serve the Lord at the same time he will use his role as the head of his household under his care to serve the Lord.

Joshua of course hopes Israel will follow his lead. But even if no one follows his lead that will not change Joshua's conviction and goal. What the Lord said at the start of Joshua's service to God is still true at the end of his life. Joshua was one of the few who ***"followed the Lord wholeheartedly."*** (Numbers 32:12)

What led Joshua to his bold statement of commitment? It was the Lord's undeserved love, his powerful acts of rescue, his fulfilled promises and God's faithfulness to his covenant.

But Joshua does not walk alone in serving the Lord. ***"Then the people answered, 'Far be it from us to forsake the LORD to serve other gods!'"*** (Joshua 24:16) ***"We too will serve the LORD, because he is our God."*** (Joshua 24:18) The people are sincere in their vows.

Joshua acknowledges this and asks for commitment to throw away the false gods. He even sets up a large rock to be a witness of what they have vowed. This will remind them again of such commands as Deuteronomy 6:5: ***"Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength."***

But he was also making a confession of his faith. He was saying that it was important for him to serve the Lord. He was not choosing to serve the false gods of the unbelieving Egyptians. He was not choosing to serve the idols of the Amorites. The Amorites were some of the people who had previously been living in Canaan, the land where the people whom God had chosen to first receive the Savior from all sin were now living. Joshua was choosing to serve the true God.

Joshua asks the people for whom God had done so much whom they are going to serve: the true God or some other gods, the gods of the world. It is easy to look around us and see some of the gods of the world. They can be found in any parking lot. They can be found along the residential streets in any city or village. They can be found in any town's business district or in any mall. Even worse, we can't even see some of the gods of the world. They are found in the heads and hearts of the unbelievers.

All these gods raise their ugly heads in our lives, too. They butt into our lives every day. We must live in the world, for it is in the world that we are to be witnesses for Christ. We have the same sinful flesh that every person in the world has ever had – except your perfect Savior from sin, Jesus Christ. And we know, as Peter tells us, ***"your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour."*** (1 Peter 5:8 King James Version) ***"Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour."*** (New International Version)

Today, right now, in this worship service, you are choosing to serve the Lord your God who has done marvelous things for you. But when you leave here, will you leave your God here? We pray not, and believe that is surely no one's intention today.

Joshua gave us the inspiration for our lives tomorrow and every day as well as for right now: ***"But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD."*** The true God was the one whom Joshua wanted to serve. We also know that Joshua, too, just as Moses, believed that God would send a Savior to redeem men from all their sins. Joshua's words are a great inspiration and hang on the walls of many Christian homes.

Joshua reminded the people of their history of tremendous blessings from God. As New Testament believers how can our faith and commitment do anything but grow as we hear again the story of our rescue by Jesus? As we now read the Scriptures – today – God has finished every act leading to our gift of eternal life. We enjoy the undeserved fruits of forgiveness, peace with God, and eternal hope. The greater the gift, the greater the gratitude. The key for us is to review our gifts of grace

"Now therefore fear the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in truth: and put away the gods which your fathers served on the other side of the flood, and in Egypt; and serve ye the LORD. And if it seem evil unto you to serve the LORD, choose you this day whom ye will serve; whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the flood, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land ye dwell: but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD." (Joshua 24:14-15) Amen.