

# A Study in Enduring Faith

November 8, 2020

St. Luke's United Church of Christ, Lititz, Pennsylvania

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## Joshua 24:1-3, 14-25

*Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel; and they presented themselves before God. And Joshua said to all the people, "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Long ago your ancestors—Terah and his sons Abraham and Nahor—lived beyond the Euphrates and served other gods. Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan and made his offspring many. I gave him Isaac;*

*"Now therefore revere the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. 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 living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord." Then the people answered, "Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods; for it is the Lord our God who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight. He protected us along all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed; and the Lord drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land. Therefore, we also will serve the Lord, for he is our God." But Joshua said to the people, "You cannot serve the Lord, for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins. If you forsake the Lord and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm, and consume you, after having done you good." And the people said to Joshua, "No, we will serve the Lord!" Then Joshua said to the people, "You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen the Lord, to serve him." And they said, "We are witnesses." He said, "Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your hearts to the Lord, the God of Israel." The people said to Joshua, "The Lord our God we will serve, and him we will obey." So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and made statutes and ordinances for them at Shechem.*

This final chapter in the book of Joshua is commonly celebrated for the bold confession of that great hero of faith. *But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.* Joshua, the great warrior leader and successor to Moses had guided Israel into the Promised Land and had led them through wars of conquest. In this last great gathering before the new nation he strongly affirmed his faith, and his vibrant faith stood in contrast to the weak confession of the Israelite masses who were soon to fall away from God. Or so the popular interpretation of this passage goes.

But this simplistic and somewhat moralistic reading of the passage misses so much of the richness and truth to be gained from this event. Indeed, Joshua is to be praised and his faith was exemplary, and the Israelites do offer us a lesson in weakening faith. The real glory of this passage is the lessons which it offers in keeping faith strong, and warnings it provides of how our walk with God can falter.

How shall we keep our faith strong like Joshua? It begins with a decision, and the great gathering at Shechem following the conquest of the land was meant as a time to decide. *Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel; and they presented themselves before God.* Throughout the Old Testament we find times when Israel gathered *en masse* to renew their covenantal relationship with God. Moses introduced the covenant at Mount Sinai in the wilderness and he gathered them during the exodus. Many years later Samuel would gather Israel to renew their faith commitment to God. Here we find Joshua, having completed the initial conquest of the land, and now an old man, gathering the nation for a farewell message and an opportunity to renew their commitment to God. Joshua's life was an amazing one. He was a faithful aid to Moses throughout the long wilderness pilgrimage. His love for God was vibrant and he never lacked for courage. Moses was a hard act to follow, but Joshua continued as Israel's leader and the people had no doubt that he was God's chosen and anointed successor.

Now it was time for Joshua to say goodbye. A new chapter was beginning in the life of Israel. They were done travelling and warring. It was time to settle the land and build a nation in this long-awaited land. Strong faith would remain the key to their success and so he boldly challenged them. *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 living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.* Joshua's obedience to God had remained strong throughout his life. Now it was time for the next generation to carry on that faith. The decision was theirs.

The renewing of a covenant is a biblical tradition, and Joshua stresses that such times are opportunities to re-affirm one's decision to follow. It is decision time! Our Baptist friends love passages like Joshua 24, for their revival tradition stresses the crucial importance of making a decision to follow Jesus Christ. This is good, although some have pointed out that certain Churches of the revival tradition become obsessed with the need to make a decision. In many of their Churches every service ends with an

altar call when folks are invited to come forward and confess Christ, or to renew an earlier confession. Many of these Christians will joyfully tell of when they made a decision to follow Jesus. The problem comes when this seems to be all that they seem to care about. Faith becomes so much about human decision that getting on with a joyful and fruitful walk with God and God's power and greater plan seem to be forgotten.

Those of us in the Reformed tradition often have our doubts about the revival churches. We may be quick to point out that all they seem to do is talk about decision such that other matters of faith are ignored. We may criticize them for often being theatrical and too emotional in their faith. We also point out that we get beyond conversion and move on to living out our faith! While these criticisms may have much validity, we must not be quick to brag. While the revivalists may have *over* stressed the importance of decision, we fall into the error of *under* stressing the need for decision. At the rite of confirmation, we are asked to make a confession of faith, a decision for Christ, and after that time we may act as if the matter is all settled and behind us. Later in life, when confronted by an exuberant Baptist and asked if we have made a decision for Jesus Christ, our answers often begin with a confused or offended look followed by the words, "I guess I did." This is not good!

Decision is something which we non-revivalists need to rediscover, and the wise path is to be found between these two traditions. We can learn much from our revivalist friends, and we all do well to pause and regularly consider our decision for Jesus Christ, and how well we are now walking in that faith. As our tradition does not stress regularly renewing bold decisions for Christ, we easily fall into the habit of being casual about our faith rather than enthused. I can speak as one who made a public confession of faith at confirmation at the age of thirteen. Since that time, I have been faithful, and then there were times when I drifted, but God has always been faithful, and for that I am so glad. Along my walk I have been glad to renew that confession of faith in various ways. The original commitment still stands, but it is so good to renew and celebrate that relationship of faith! I often think of the husband who regarding his marriage remarked, "I told her I loved her forty-seven years ago, and if anything changes, I will let her know!" (Aren't you ladies sorry that someone else found that Romeo before you could?) At face value the man's statement makes some sense. He has remained faithful, but it doesn't sound as though it has been much fun! This is a sad marriage, for a lively and joyous marriage means regularly proclaiming and celebrating the vow which still endures, and so it should be in our faith relationship with God.

As we think of our decisions for Jesus Christ, we would do well to remember the song which is probably known to our Sunday schools and camps, and may have even found its way into our sanctuary worship on occasion: "I Have Decided to Follow Jesus."

*I have decided to follow Jesus, I have decided to follow Jesus  
I have decided to follow Jesus, no turning back, no turning back.*

And then the additional stanzas

*The world behind me, the cross before me,  
Though none go with me, still I will follow,  
Will you decide now to follow Jesus?*

Each stanza ends with that bold affirmation, *no turning back, no turning back*. This chorus belongs in our hymnal!

Joshua stressed the need for decision and his example was clear. *As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord*. Such decisions are not made in a vacuum, and he warns of the kinds of attacks which will come upon our decisions of faith. *Now therefore revere the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord*. We are warned against the many gods of this world, and while we no longer live in an age of gold and silver idols, there are many forces and temptations which compete for our commitment to God. The world is always trying to pull us away from our walk with God. Notice how Joshua speaks of two categories of temptations. First, we are told to *put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt*. It appears that Joshua is referring to the familiar temptations and idols which have competed for our attention over many generations. These are the familiar sins and troubles of life, such as greed, selfishness, worry, etc. Joshua also warns against the gods of the *Amorites in whose land you are living*, and by this he means the new temptations now with them in the land they have recently acquired. We have enough trouble dealing with the old and familiar temptations of life, but we must add to this the new sins that are ever calling us. For instance, a person might have overcome an addiction to gambling or pornography, but then comes an advancing digital technology and this person must now battle a temptation which is just the press of a button away on their smart phone! A person may have beaten back the temptations that worked against their being an active Christian with a firm Church involvement, but a move to a new job may present a host of new temptations. Joshua knows the temptations of the world are many and dangerous, so he warns the Israelites to *put them away*, and by this he means far away!

Next, Joshua warns against the sin of presumption. The dialogue with the people is a little difficult to grasp at first reading. Having been called to renew their commitment to God and to put aside idols, they answered, *Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods*. The people speak clearly against following other gods, so it is surprising when their leader answers them harshly. *But Joshua said to the people, "You cannot serve the Lord, for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins*. It would seem that Joshua was scolding them for having done nothing wrong, but there is more to this rebuke than

first meets the eye. Apparently, the people were responding in a presumptuous way. It was as if they were saying "Of course we will follow our God and put away our idols! We cannot imagine doing otherwise." Sensing this dangerous attitude Joshua scolded them with the reminder that these temptations are great and our God is a jealous and demanding God who will not tolerate our serving other gods. They could not imagine their nation ever falling into idolatry, but that only demonstrated their failure of imagination, for this is exactly what would happen. Joshua knew what was in their future. The devil, the world, and all their temptations are real and powerful and we are wise to walk humbly, never saying "I would never...", but always realizing that we are all capable of so many sins. Let us walk humbly and claim as our own the prayer of the hymnist:

*I am weak but Thou art strong. Jesus keep me from all wrong.*

Finally, we see in this story the problem of passing the faith on to the next generation. We must not be too harsh in our attitudes toward the people Joshua addressed, for this generation of Israelites actually served faithfully. As we read ahead to the end of the book of Joshua and into the book of Judges, we learn that those who remembered Joshua and the leaders of that day were good followers of God. The problems came in the following generations who had no actual memory of the exodus and settlement of the land. Faith is something which needs to be very deliberately communicated from one generation to another. It makes me want to weep when I hear a parent, raised in the Christian faith but too preoccupied to raise their own children in a Church, say such things as "I am sure that my kids see my faith and values and will grow up to be good people." Faith must be taught in a very deliberate way! Sadly, we traditional Churches have done poorly at retaining the coming generations. Some have drifted from active faith altogether, while others are moving to congregations which they feel are more suitable for modern times. Often this drift happens despite our best efforts. The challenge before us is the same as that of the early Israelites. It is a great challenge, but we must never give up.

To summarize Joshua's message, he calls us to renew our decision of faith and to battle the competing gods and sins all around us. He calls us to an active and aggressive faith which is ever doing battle with the enemy! This lesson can be summarized in the illustration of home ownership. When we purchase a home, we make a significant commitment, but we do so gladly for we long to have a place to call our own. Having signed on the dotted line and agreed to years of payments we joyfully enter into our wonderful new home. Perhaps the home is newly built. If it is an existing home it has probably been spruced up for the selling and we delight in the loveliness of it all! Then comes the rude awakening. This house seems to be falling apart! No, it is not crumbling before our eyes, but it keeps needing maintenance and repair. The lawn does not stay groomed and beautiful by itself and the flower beds don't plant themselves. Something is always breaking and the hardware store is a familiar place to a homeowner. It is not uncommon for a number of problems to

come all at once, and one then feels as though they are under siege and the forces of nature are working to destroy our homes. Just recently my home has had issues with insects, appliances, plumbing and a roof leak, along with the fall outdoor cleanup. Gladly these problems were all manageable, but they kept us busy and caused some expense. It is an ongoing battle to keep a house looking good. We know this and so we fight on. So it is with our faith. Our belief in Jesus Christ and our commitment to serve in joyful obedience is always being challenged, and sometimes these challenges come in bunches. Our schedules and finances get squeezed and tempt us to draw back on our Church commitments. Family tensions may test our abilities to be gracious and kind. Doubts trouble our minds and worry is always knocking at the door. Our faith and walk is under an ongoing attack, and therefore our walk of faith is to be understood as an ongoing battle. What attacks are being made against your faith in these days, and how are you responding. Don't be surprised by these challenges to your faith, but be ready to fight back with the strength of the Holy Spirit.

And don't just think defensively. Home owners want to maintain their homes so that they endure, but they want to do more. We love to see our houses beautified and expanded. Yes, this requires effort and expense, but it is an investment which we are glad to make. So it should be with our faith. We need to maintain our faith and commitments, but we need to also consider how we can expand and advance our work for Christ. Might there be a new project, spiritual goal, leadership or commitment for Christ which God might be calling you to make? The enemy may fight back and make this a difficult step, but remember that this is all a battle and we must fight on.

Have I depressed you with this illustration of home ownership? Are you now stewing with thoughts of your washer/dryer which seems ready to expire or your roof which needs to be replaced? The battle can be discouraging, but before becoming any more depressed, consider this. How much does your house mean to you? What would your life be like without it? We love our homes! They are treasures. They are safe sanctuaries where we can find rest and celebrate family, and as we think about our homes, we are grateful beyond words for these blessings! And so it is with our walk with Jesus Christ. Yes, it is challenging and always presents us with battles to be fought, but what fight could be more worthwhile? Let us also remember that despite our best efforts our houses will someday decay and be no more, but our walk of abundant life in Jesus Christ will only get better with the years, and on into eternity.

It is time for us to heed Joshua's call to renew and recommit to our faith. Let us learn a lesson from Joshua and our Baptist friends. It is time to live that faith day by day, putting idols far away and willingly fighting the good fight. With Joshua let us stake out our claim in the beautiful land. Let us affirm with this great man, *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 living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.*