

October 11

Lesson 6

Choose Today

Focal Passage: Joshua 24:14-28

Background Text: Joshua 24:1-28

Purpose Statement: To seek out those people with whom we can commit to mutual accountability to enable our spiritual growth

Joshua 24:14-28

¹⁴"So now, revere the LORD. Serve him honestly and faithfully. Put aside the gods that your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates and in Egypt and serve the LORD. ¹⁵But if it seems wrong in your opinion to serve the LORD, then choose today whom you will serve. Choose the gods whom your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you live. But my family and I will serve the LORD."

¹⁶Then the people answered, "God forbid that we ever leave the LORD to serve other gods! ¹⁷The LORD is our God. He is the one who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage. He has done these mighty signs in our sight. He has protected us the whole way we've gone and in all the nations through which we've passed. ¹⁸The LORD has driven out all the nations before us, including the Amorites who lived in the land. We too will serve the LORD, because he is our God."

¹⁹Then Joshua said to the people, "You can't serve the LORD, because he is a holy God. He is a jealous God. He won't forgive your rebellion and your sins. ²⁰If you leave the LORD and serve foreign gods, then he will turn around and do you harm and finish you off, in spite of having done you good in the past."

²¹Then the people said to Joshua, "No! The LORD is the one we will serve."

²²So Joshua said to the people, "You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen to serve the LORD."

They said, "We are witnesses!"

²³"So now put aside the foreign gods that are among you. Focus your hearts on the LORD, the God of Israel."

²⁴The people said to Joshua, "We will serve the LORD our God and will obey him."

²⁵On that day Joshua made a covenant for the people and established just rule for them at Shechem. ²⁶Joshua wrote these words in God's Instruction scroll. Then he took a large stone and put it up there under the oak in the sanctuary of the LORD. ²⁷Joshua said to all the people, "This stone will serve here as a witness against us, because it has heard all the LORD's words that he spoke to us. It will serve as a witness

against you in case you aren't true to your God." ²⁸Then Joshua sent the people away to each one's legacy.

Key Verses: "On that day Joshua made a covenant for the people and established just rule for them at Shechem. Joshua wrote these words in God's Instruction scroll. Then he took a large stone and put it up there under the oak in the sanctuary of the LORD" (Joshua 24:25-26).

We find changing something about ourselves hard. The one time of the year in which large numbers of people try to make reform for themselves comes up in a little over two months.

Some people make New Year's resolutions, and some have quit trying. Some of the most common resolutions include exercising, losing weight, eating better, saving money, taking music lessons, and developing some new hobby. Unfortunately, despite the best of intentions, most people do not stick with their resolutions. Some of my resolutions over the years have included keeping my desk neater and reading a poem a day. Both of those resolutions fizzled out.

We feel caught in a kind of trap. We want to make the change we have resolved to do, but old patterns die hard. New behaviors don't come easily. If we cannot follow through on our resolution, we become discouraged and less likely to try a new resolution. The old habits and the old ways simply continue, and we feel frustrated. We may consider the change important and wish to become the person with the new skill--more discipline, neater desk, or healthier body--but inertia keeps us from getting there.

An Urgent Sermon

On the surface, it sounds as if Joshua wanted a kind of change in the tribes he had gathered at Shechem. He explicitly challenged them to "put aside" the gods they had worshiped and to choose the Lord (Joshua 24:14). That sounds as if the people would change from one religion (beyond the Euphrates "gods") to another (worship of YHWH).

It's important to note that the term *YHWH* is considered the proper name of the divinity of Israel. Joshua called the people to worship YHWH instead of the gods beyond the Euphrates. We often hear this term pronounced as "Yahweh." Whenever we see *LORD* in the Old Testament, the Hebrew term *YHWH* stands behind it.¹

In reality, the tribes of Israel had worshiped YHWH while they lived in Canaan. Joshua actually hoped to accomplish several things with this last speech/sermon. He wanted to unify the tribes, and he wanted them to commit to continued worship and service of YHWH.

Joshua faced a tough situation. He knew that the end of his life approached. He had provided leadership since Moses' death. The great mission of the people began back in Genesis 12, with the call of Abram/Abraham. His descendants had the mission of blessing "all the families of the earth" (Genesis 12:3). The mission had continued in Abram's travels into Canaan, with the people in Egypt, in the wilderness wandering after escaping from oppression in Egypt, and now with the people in Canaan.

Joshua faced the prospect that, after his death, the mission might just fade away. When we look ahead into the Book of Judges, we see that, in times of poor leadership, the people faced adversity. Judges recounts how, after the deaths of Joshua and his contemporaries, "another

generation came after them who didn't know the LORD or the things that he had done for Israel" (Judges 2:10).

Joshua needed to communicate in this one sermon a message that inspired the people to continue in the faith they had practiced since crossing the Jordan. He wanted them to make a full commitment to their faith.

Now that the long journey had ended and the people had won their battles, their commitment could fade. The people could find resources when faced with an enemy on the field of battle. Battles get the blood pumping. In Canaan, the people might simply have allowed the faith to grow stale.

Joshua needed to preach in such a way that they understood the stakes in maintaining the faith. He reminded them of all that had happened since the time of Abraham. Each story reminded the people of their identity. God had invested in them and had brought them this far. They must continue the mission.

As you look back on your life, can you point out times and circumstances when God faithfully delivered you? How does remembering those times of faithfulness inspire you to stay faithful to God?

An Altar Call

Joshua called the people to obedience, and then he made an "altar call," saying to the people, "So now, revere the LORD. Serve him honestly and faithfully. Put aside the gods that your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates and in Egypt and serve the LORD" (Joshua 24:14). This call served more as a motivation to continue the faith than to change from the other gods to worship of YHWH. Nevertheless, the call carried much significance.

One of the ways the faith could have died out would have been for the people to mix elements of the religions around them with worship of YHWH. Joshua called

them to complete commitment to YHWH.

Joshua then made the memorable statement that has found its way onto posters, bumper stickers, and coffee mugs: "As for me and my house, we will serve the LORD" (verse 15, KJV). After recounting the stories that gave the people their identity, Joshua made his personal commitment. Joshua took his stand.

Joshua continued the sermon by calling the people to obedience. When they confidently asserted that they would obey (verse 18), Joshua chided them. Perhaps he wanted them to take seriously the vow they had just made. Joshua likely overstated his case when he warned the people that YHWH would not "forgive [their] rebellion and [their] sins" (verse 19).

The history up to this point, and even into the Book of Judges, reveals a God who forgave the people, hung in there with them, and started anew when necessary. After the warning, the people again confidently expressed their willingness and ability to obey (verse 21).

Joshua finished the sermon with an act we might consider strange. He took a stone and set it up "under the oak in the sanctuary of the LORD" (verse 26). Joshua declared, "This stone will serve here as a witness against us, because it has heard all the LORD's words that he spoke to us" (verse 27). The stone would hold the people accountable.

Ancient people understood as well as we do that stones do not listen to sermons. Nevertheless, the stone was a permanent reminder of the commitment the people had made. Every time the people saw the stone, Joshua's words would echo in their ears.

Describe a time when a sermon caught your attention and helped you understand some aspect of the Christian life in a new way. In what ways did the sermon affect you? How did you change because of the sermon?

Joining the Community

We can hear Joshua's words for our situation in a few ways. Joshua called the people to put away other gods. We know that, even though we would not call ourselves idol-worshippers (meaning we give allegiance to an actual physical idol), we don't give God our full worship and devotion. We have all heard the charge that we end up making some other abstraction our real god. Do we invest more of our time, interest, energy, and devotion in something other than God?

The temptation of idolatry of this kind is that our "worship" of something else isn't obvious, even to us. We would not call what we do worship, so we don't think we practice idolatry.

The other problem with talking about this kind of secret idolatry is that it is hard for us to articulate exactly what it means to say that we put God first in our lives. In reality, we don't put God at the top of a list and say that God is our first priority. What we actually should do is ask how our belief and trust in God affects everything else that we do.

Do we treat other people differently because of our faith in God? Do we handle our money in a certain way because of our faith in God? Do we allocate our time in a certain way because of our faith in God? This text from Joshua offers us the opportunity to reflect on the things we worship in place of God.

Whether you are new to the Christian faith or have been a Christian a long time, these words from Joshua can help to firm up your commitment to the God of the Bible. Joshua recounts God's mighty acts on behalf of the people, the acts that formed them into a community.

We Christians claim these acts, alongside our Jewish brothers and sisters, and say that, what God did for the people of Israel, God also did for us. Those acts form part of our community identity. God has hung in there with us, too. We add to

those acts Jesus' life, ministry, death, and resurrection. Jesus' ministry and the giving of the Holy Spirit form us as a community. These words from Joshua invite us to become stronger in our commitment.

What do you mean when you say that you put God first in your life? How is that commitment evident in how you live?

Deepening the Commitment

The most likely way that these words apply to us comes in our need to grow in our faith. Just as people make New Year's resolutions in an attempt to become better people, we in the church often long for a deeper faith, a more disciplined prayer life, a greater appreciation and understanding of Scripture, the ability to face life's challenges with more strength and wisdom.

These words from Joshua can become a motivation to begin a process of deepening our faith. Faith itself is an inward quality, but we can build practices that can become a means for God to give us the gift of deepening our faith.

We can look at starting these practices the same way we approach New Year's resolutions. Some common advice about resolutions helps us find ways to keep them and incorporate them into our lives.

One of the bits of advice that we often hear in trying to keep our resolutions is to commit to something concrete. We might commit to reading a chapter of the Bible each day. In order to make that work, we might seek out a devotional guide that will help us find spiritual nourishment in what we read. If we do not currently read a portion of Scripture every day, a chapter a day can be a place to start. Perhaps one psalm and one chapter of the New Testament a day can get the practice going.

Making a concrete goal, deciding on a time and a place to read, and celebrating victories can help bring success in such an endeavor. If we already read Scripture

every day, we might increase the amount we read--two chapters instead of one. If we do not follow a regular prayer time, we might begin to set aside time every day for prayer. As with Scripture reading, we should set a concrete goal, one that we can actually follow, perhaps beginning with five minutes every day.

Another commitment we might make is to become more involved in our church or some ministry. Does a group within the church need volunteers? Can we start a new ministry at the church? Can we volunteer as greeters or to help clean up after an event? Does a Sunday school class need teachers? Even small steps can lead to greater involvement. Becoming more involved in church may not be easy, but it can bring a deeper faith and joy. Some conflicts may occur, but keep going.

Another piece of advice we receive in trying to keep resolutions or to begin a new practice is to seek out support. When we have others who encourage us and celebrate our victories, we are more likely to continue our practice. Perhaps some members of the class can agree together to start new spiritual practices, become more involved in the church, or to increase the witness of the church in the community.

If you form such a group of supporters, you become the stone in Joshua's ministry to the people at Shechem. The stone "heard" the sermon and served as a reminder to the people. Those who support one another in developing spiritual practices and becoming more involved in the church become one another's stone. The whole group can become the stone that encourages its members.

What spiritual practices, new ministries, or outreach do you think you would like to start? How will you make the changes concrete? In what ways can you recruit supporters who will serve as your "stone"?

We thank you, O God, for all of the ways that you help grow our faith. We thank you for the stories in the Bible of how you formed a people

into your community to share your love with the world. We rejoice to serve in that community. Help us to commit to ways that we can deepen our faith; in Jesus' name. Amen.

'Out of respect for people of the Jewish faith, the term should be pronounced "Ha-Shem," which is Hebrew for "the name." Jews do not pronounce the name of the divinity.