**AS FOR ME AND MY HOUSEHOLD, WE WILL SERVE THE LORD**

November 24, 2019

Joshua 23:1-24:18

Key Verse 24:14-15 “Now fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your ancestors worshiped beyond the Euphrates River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates, 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, a servant of God, has finished his mission to conquer and to allot the promised land to the twelve tribes successfully. Now, he is about to die. So he summons the people of Israel and gives farewell addresses. First, to the leaders who served under him -- the tribal elders, leaders, judges, and officials (23:2; 24:1) -- and then to all the people in all the tribes (24:1). He recalls the victories God has given, and commands them to be obedient to the God’s covenant. In particular, Joshua speaks about the issues closest to his heart: Separating from the people of the land and their gods, and making a clear decision to serve the Lord with one’s family. In this passage, “serve the Lord” is repeated 10 times. He gives a strong warning against serving other gods. They are supposed to remain as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. May God help us listen to Joshua’s farewell addresses so that we may declare with Joshua, “As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.”

Look at verses 23:1-2. Some 20 years after the end of the conquest and distribution of the land, Joshua summoned Israel’s leaders. He said to them: “I am very old.” (2b) Normally a man, who is getting older, gradually becomes weaker in his will, but Joshua strongly kept God’s words until then. Old man Joshua focused on one theme—God’s unfailing faithfulness to Israel and their corresponding responsibility to be faithful to Him. He repeated his central message three times (vv. 3-8, 9-13, 14-16).

Look at verses 9-10. “The Lord has driven out before you great and powerful nations; to this day no one has been able to withstand them. One of you routs a thousand, because the Lord your God fights for you, just as he promised.” They won the victory after victory because of God’s help even though the enemies had superior numbers and superior weapons. Most of all, verse 14b says, “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.” God has been faithful to fulfill all good promises to Israel, and will keep his promises faithfully. The Lord is 100 % faithful. He will never at any time fail to do whatever He says He will do. He will never let us down.

Therefore, how should they live before God? Look at verses 6-8. “Be very strong; be careful to obey all that is written in the Book of the Law of Moses, without turning aside to the right or to the left. Do not associate with these nations that remain among you; do not invoke the names of their gods or swear by them. You must not serve them or bow down to them. But you are to hold fast to the Lord your God, as you have until now.” Joshua already knew their complacency to take it easy because of God’s blessings, and the danger of the people’s intermingling with the Canaanites’ corrupt culture. They should be careful to obey God’s Law and hold fast to and serve God only, not engaging in idol worship. However, if they violate the covenant of the Lord and go and serve other gods and bow down to them, the Lord’s anger will burn against them, and they will quickly perish from the good land God has given them (16). Later, when Israel betrayed God by breaking the covenant of God, God removed them from the promised land and sent them into Babylonian captivity.

In his own lifetime, Joshua had witnessed how Israel had committed idolatry by worshipping the golden calf, and how debased the people became then: According to Exodus 32:6 they offered burnt offerings to the golden calf, and brought peace offerings; and the people sat down to eat and to drink, and got up to indulge in revelry. God was so angry that he threatened to destroy all the Israelites. Only through Moses’ intercessory prayer, God relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened. Joshua had also seen how God’s wrath burned so intensely against the Israelites at Shittim, where they were seduced by Midianite women to commit sexual immorality and to worship an idol (Numbers 25:1-5). Twenty-four thousand Israelites were struck dead in a plague because of this! There is no doubt that Joshua would want to ensure that such a plague as this would not happen to Israel again. Because of this, he gave serious warnings in his last words to Israel.

Look at verse 12. “But if you turn away and ally yourselves with the survivors of these nations that remain among you and if you intermarry with them and associate with them, then…they will become snares and traps for you, whips on your backs and thorns in your eyes, until you perish from this good land, which the Lord your God has given you.” We face the same issues today. You and I are constantly tempted by the world. Often we let it invade not just our workplaces but also our homes through television and the Internet. We are to be in the world, but not of it. We are to live in the world, but not allow the world to live in us. We should live a holy life, not like other worldly people. Romans 12:2 says, “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is -- his good, pleasing and perfect will.” We are to be the kingdom of priests and a holy nation. 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1 also says, “Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness…or what does a believer have in common with an unbeliever...Let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God.”

Chapter 24 contains the renewal of God’s covenant to his people. Look at verse 24:1. “Then Joshua assembled all the tribes of Israel at Shechem.” Now Joshua had chosen Shechem as the site for his last act of the renewal of the covenant. This is where the Lord first promised the land of Canaan to Abraham and his descendants (Gen 12:6-7). Here in Genesis 35:1-4, after the incident involving his daughter and the Shechemites, Jacob buried all the idols found in his household in preparation for meeting the Lord at Bethel. Then the terror of God fell on all the towns around them so that no one pursued them. Shechem is the historic place of covenants and renewal of their minds toward God. Joshua chose this place as the site of the renewal of God’s covenant.

First, Joshua briefly reviews God’s history from Genesis until the present day, focusing on God’s marvelous grace and how they received their inheritance in the Canaan land. Look at verses 24:2-13. God called Abraham who worshiped other gods beyond the Euphrates and led him throughout Canaan (2b-4). When they were slaves under the power of Pharaoh, God delivered them out of Egypt and let them into Canaan (5-10). Look at verses 11-13. “‘Then you crossed the Jordan and came to Jericho. The citizens of Jericho fought against you…but I gave them into your hands. I sent the hornet ahead of you…You did not do it with your own sword and bow. So I gave you a land on which you did not toil and cities you did not build; and you live in them and eat from vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant.’” It was “God” who spoke in this review of Israel’s history; 18 times the personal pronoun “I” is used: “I took…I gave…I sent…I brought…I delivered.” From first to last, Israel’s conquests, deliverances, and victory were because of God’s mercies and nothing was out of their own making.

Now what decision did Joshua ask his people to make? Look at verses 14-15. “Now fear the Lord and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your ancestors worshiped beyond the Euphrates River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.” In this passage, the most frequently repeated phrase is “to serve the Lord.” This indicates the act of absolute devotion, commitment, and obedience to the Lord. Fundamentally, human beings cannot become their own masters, but have to serve something. Joshua strongly urged them to “choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve.” (15a) Joshua did not give any possibility of neutrality between God and other gods. There is no middle ground or neutral zone in the spiritual world. Furthermore, it should be made “this day, today.” In Matthew 6:24, Jesus clearly proclaims that we have to make a choice, “No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.”

What does it mean to serve the Lord practically? It basically means to obey him with all our hearts and follow him. Many people have their own agenda, and their own plan and ask God to fulfil their plans. It is not serving the Lord. John 12:26 says, “Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me.” In order to serve God, we have to watch where God is working around me, and join him in his work. Jesus also said in John 14:23, “Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching.” Many people do not have obedience problem. They have love problem. Practically speaking, serving the Lord means to make him the Lord of all the areas of my life: Moving away from my way of thinking to God’s way of thinking; moving away from my purposes to working on God’s purposes; moving away from my way of doing things to God’s ways; moving away from my human values to God’s values. Serving God also means serving our brothers and sisters who are in need. Matthew 25:40 says, “The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.”

Joshua’s rhetorical method was so strong and convincing. First of all, he commanded them to fear and to serve God only. Then he gave them a choice to choose for themselves. Finally, he shared his personal decision, saying, “But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.” (15b) Today God wants us to choose to serve either God only or other gods. We should choose either the narrow way to life or the broad road to destruction (Matt 7:13). Just as the Israelites have already mixed with Canaan’s corrupt cultures and worshiped idols, we are also surrounded by numerous idols and sins, which lead to destruction and corruption. In order to live as Jesus’ disciples, we have to make a clear decision. God’s blessings and his gift of life begin from our decision to serve God only. Where there is no decision, nothing happens in God’s works! In the Babylonian captivity, Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine, and decided to serve God only (Dan 1:8). Then God blessed his decision and made him the source of blessings forever. In Luke 14, Jesus challenged his disciples to “sit down and estimate the cost” of being a disciple (Lk 25-35). Jesus’ disciples should estimate the cost of being a disciple and make a decision to pay the cost of it or not. These days many people emphasize the cheap grace, and just teach worldly and material blessings. They do not emphasize that we need to take up the cross of Jesus to live as God’s holy people. Where there is no clear decision to follow in Jesus’ footsteps, there will be no spiritual growth, and God will not be glorified. May God help each one of us to decide to serve God only.

Verses 16-18 describe the response of the people and their renewal of covenant. Look at verses 16-18. “Then the people answered, “Far be it from us to forsake the Lord to serve other gods! It was the Lord our God himself who brought us and our parents up out of Egypt, from that land of slavery, and performed those great signs before our eyes. He protected us on our entire journey and among all the nations through which we traveled. And the Lord drove out before us all the nations, including the Amorites, who lived in the land. We too will serve the Lord, because he is our God.”” All Israelites responded with Amen, moved by the force of Joshua’s arguments and of his example to serve God only.

In conclusion, Joshua, the servant of God, commanded the Israelites to fear the Lord and serve him with all faithfulness. He challenged them to choose and serve the Lord only. May God help us to choose to serve God only so that we may enjoy God’s blessings forever. May God bless us to keep our clear identity of Jesus’ disciples in this corrupt generation. May the last words of Joshua have a similar impact on our lives so that we may serve the Lord obediently and faithfully all the days of our life.

Big Idea: Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve.