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Joshua 24:1-15

Grace Community Church, Tucson
May 22, 2011

**Choose This Day Whom You Will Serve
(A Sermon for Confirmation Sunday)**

I love to read, especially literature, especially novels. I love stories... I love it when I find the story of God, the truth of Scripture, though in subtle ways. I was really impressed when I came across a story of a teacher telling his students that there will come a time when "you have to make a choice between what is right and what is easy." Yes, so true.

There often comes a time, will come more than once, when we all have to choose between what is right and what is easy. And that choice has deep and lasting consequences. In those choices, our true faith is revealed: where do we really put our hope? What do we depend on, trust in? Who or what determines what we do?

So, in order to prepare for these moments, for the hard choices of life, we must *choose now whom we will serve*, whether it is God, or the false gods of the culture around us. This is the challenge that is in our text today from Joshua 24:1-15. I invite you to turn in your Bibles or follow along on the screen as I read along. **[read text, skipping a vv 9-10, sum 11-12]**

Here at the end of the book of Joshua, the nation of Israel is finally settling into the Promised Land, after the long journey from Egypt, after many years in the desert, they finally crossed the Jordan River, conquered the land of Canaan and most of its inhabitants, and divided up the land. They have just moved right onto farms and into towns just sitting there ready for them. Now they are starting on a new journey and a new reality: life as a people of God in the Promised Land.

Joshua knows he is nearing the end of his life, and so he gives a farewell speech to Israel. He gathers them together at Shechem, a place that has lots of connections to the history of the Israelites. He gathers them together to urge them to affirm the covenant with their God. He gives them this charge, because he knows the dangers and choices facing them. He knows they will constantly face that choice between what is right and what is easy.

As the days go by and things go well, they will be tempted to be complacent and to forget. They face the danger of sitting on the pile of plunder from their victories, sitting in the houses and towns they did not build, harvesting the grain and fruit they did not plant, and thinking that *they* got themselves there. They face a very real danger of forgetting that it was *God* that got them this far, not their own strength, knowledge, or bravery.

Did you hear in the text, how many times there are "I" verbs? **[read several]** The focus is on what God has done. They cannot claim to be chosen because they are special, or to have escaped from Egypt or won the land of Canaan by their own cunning and might. No, it was the Lord who chose them, who first called Abraham, gave him descendants, who sent Moses and Aaron and delivered them from slavery... **[summarize the rest]** They couldn't have done any of this on their own: they would have been killed by Pharaoh's army, or starved in the desert, or turned back,

or lost those battles. Without God, there would be no Israel anymore. The blessings Israel was experiencing and their very identity as God's people was *a result of God's action, not human action*.

The danger was that if they forgot this, they would take the easier path, and make bad choices. They would face immense peer pressure from the nations around them: pressure to look and act like their neighbors, to disregard the ways of God, and even to worship other gods. After all, the nations all around them worshiped many false gods. It was unheard of in that time and culture to worship just one god or to claim that there is only one true God. And the Israelites themselves had worshiped other gods before they were delivered from Egypt, before they made a covenant with God at Sinai. Old habits are hard to break. So it would be a hard choice, a hard choice that would make them stick out as weird and different. It is much easier to blend in than to stick out, isn't it?

And it is much harder to choose to worship God alone, especially when he is unseen. It is much easier to worship a god that you can see and touch. In the years ahead, when the Israelites faced difficulties, it would be so much easier to depend on the gods around them, who were visible and tangible, and who could be pleased, manipulated, than to trust in God, who is unseen and free to make his own decisions.

Knowing what the Israelites would face in the days and years ahead, Joshua challenged them to choose then and there whom they would serve: whether they would serve the Lord God, the one and true God, or whether they would serve the gods of their ancestors and of the people around them.

vv 14-- This required two steps for them: 1) to serve God totally and faithfully, and 2) to turn away from false gods. He called on them to choose to serve God wholeheartedly, to make a commitment that day to always serve God. To take a clear stand for God then and there. But then they also had to put practices in place to follow through on that commitment. That meant they had to burn or bury any idols... constantly wage war against the things that might turn them from God. (marriage to foreign women?)

"Choose this day whom you will serve." After saying this, Joshua then declared that he and his family would serve God alone. He set the example, led the way, with his firm stand.

I believe that all of us also face this same choice, and that the words of Joshua speak across the ages, present a challenge to us today.

First, let me speak to the confirmands. Today is a high point in your life. Today you are affirming your commitment to follow Jesus. Today you come to the end of a long journey, the end of three years of confirmation. This is also part of a big transition for you, going from childhood, from elementary and middle school to high school. You are entering an exciting new stage, but one with increasing responsibility and harder choices.

It would be a temptation for you, just like the Israelites, to forget that it is God who has brought

you this far, to think that you got this far out of your own doing. You did not build the house you are living in, you did not choose your family. You did not merely follow the instructions in the "how to be me" kit. It was God who created you lovingly, who gave you your skills and abilities, who put you in a place of privilege with so many opportunities.

It will be easy to forget that it was God, who out of his love sent Jesus Christ to die on the cross to pay for your sin. It was not your good works and scrubbed ears that earned you peace with God. You could never do enough homework, never do enough good works to earn God's approval--if we truly got what we deserved, we would all be lost. It was God who raised Jesus from the dead and offers you salvation, who brings healing, wholeness, offers true life. It was God who called you to follow him, the Holy Spirit who has been at work in you, the Creator God who claimed you for himself. It is tempting to think that it was your own doing, but it has been God's hand all along.

In the days and years ahead, you will face some hard choices, choices between what is right and what is easy. It will be much easier to choose what you can see and touch and feel over that which is mysterious and unseen. It will be much easier to go with the crowd than follow Jesus down the road of discipleship. You will be surrounded the voices of your peers, it will be easy to forget all that you have learned, what your teachers and leaders here at Grace have taught you. The noise of the world will only get louder, and it will be hard to hear the quiet voice of God.

So I urge you, I challenge you, as you have declared your faith before this congregation, to choose this day whom you will serve. *I challenge you to choose to serve God and follow Jesus.*

And to take that second step and turn away from anything that will pull you away from God. We don't have wooden idols to throw away, really. But there are other actions we can take. to remove distractions... Last weekend, on our retreat... we talked about spiritual practices, habits that train us spiritually, that tune our ears to the voice of God, such as reading and studying Scripture, service, relationships, confession, worship, solitude, etc. We talked about different kinds of prayer. I encourage you to put some of those habits in place now that will help you make the hard choices and help you stay faithful to God your whole life.

God is a trustworthy God, a God who has kept his promises. We have the Bible, full of all kinds of accounts, to remind us of that. God is a faithful, loving God, and you will never regret your trust in him.

This choice is not just for the confirmands, but for the whole congregation. It is a choice for all of us, a challenge for all of us: to choose today whom we will serve. *To choose now to serve God and follow Jesus every minute, every day, no matter what.*

I feel that this is an especially important time for us as a church to reaffirm our commitment to Jesus, to once again declare that we serve the Lord alone.

Last fall we studied the book *The Land Between: Finding God in Difficult Transitions*. We felt that *we* were in a "land between" ourselves as we went through a time of transition, with Scot and Jed leaving, and the search for a senior pastor. In many ways we are similar to Israel at this point in the book of Joshua: we have traveled far, fought some battles, and we are close to life in the promised land -- a new season with a new pastor. We are excited about him coming,

excited about settling down to life with a pastor again, excited about life and growth and whatever God has for us.

Of course it is okay to be excited about Pastor David coming. But we also face the temptation to believe that our good fortune is our own doing. To believe that it is our strength that has brought us this far. As we step into this new season, *we must not forget that it was the work of God that brought us this far* -- through that time of transition, it was God who worked in the choice a new pastor. It was God, working in and through us, sure. *But it is God who has done the work, not us.*

Remember the sermon series that we had right after Pastor Scot left? It was from 1 Samuel 7:12, *"thus far the Lord has helped us."* We must remember that God was with us all along, who provided us for us in the wilderness of transition, who led us to Pastor Doug, who gave us such great leaders. We must not forget that God was at work the whole time--during the last 18 months we have welcomed more members into our body and baptized more new believers than many years previously. God has been at work in our midst, and we must not forget that.

In the midst of excitement, and when we are no longer facing the unknown, when life settles down, and things seem to be going well, it will be a temptation to forget this, and to turn away from dependence on God, to turn to false gods. The gods of the culture around us will call for our attention: the god of materialism, the god of convenience, the god of self, the god of security.

Our culture is so caught up in trends and whatever is new and happening, and it calls us to do the same. It also tells us to trust in human strength: "I've done this..." I believe one of our biggest temptations will be to put our hope in our new pastor, to put too high expectations, to depend on him in an unhealthy way. We may be tempted to trust that when he comes, everything will be okay. That now that he has come, we will grow, things will happen.

But our hope in Jesus Christ alone! Our hope is in Jesus Christ not in any human being or new program! Hope has never left the building, our hope has always been and always will be in God and not in people.

It may seem like I am splitting hairs, but I see this as a real temptation for us, perhaps not now, but definitely in the weeks and months to come. We must decide now to constant remember and declare that our hope is in Jesus Christ, who was raised from the dead, who sits at the right hand of God, who calls us as his church to do his work in the world-- our head, leader. Our hope is in the faithful God who has brought us this far.

We need to understand that if we have growth or success as a church, it is because God is working in and through us, not because of our own strength, or because of any pastor or program that we put in place. We put our trust and hope in Christ alone.

How can we face the temptation to trust in others, and not put our hope in Christ alone? Today and every day, we affirm that Jesus is Lord, that God is the only true God. Admit that we need his salvation and submit totally to him. It means that we live as he lived and follow his teaching, that we give ourselves wholeheartedly to him and let him control every area of our lives. As a church, putting our hope in Christ means that we will listen to his voice and prioritize what is important to him, not be distracted by world's version of success.

And we must take the second step as well, put aside false gods, and keep ourselves accountable. As one writer has said, we need to have a "zero-tolerance policy" towards anything that might tempt us away from dependence on God. Look seriously at our words, watch carefully how we choose to portray events. And we need to put into practice habits that will keep us faithful, the ones I mentioned earlier: regular prayer, study of Scripture, worship, service -- spiritual disciplines that will remind us of all that God has done, that will train us to hear God's voice.

Choose this day, *this day*, whom you will serve. Will you serve the Almighty God, father of our Lord Jesus Christ? Trust in God alone, trust Christ to lead us, and to turn away from false gods. This is the most important and the hardest decision you will ever make. Choose today to serve the one and only living God, for he is faithful and good! Amen.

{prayer}