

October 14, 2018
What Promise Will We Keep?
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Joshua 24:1-28

24 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. ² 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. ³ 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; ⁴ and to Isaac I gave Jacob and Esau. I gave Esau the hill country of Seir to possess, but Jacob and his children went down to Egypt. ⁵ Then I sent Moses and Aaron, and I plagued Egypt with what I did in its midst; and afterwards I brought you out.

⁶ When I brought your ancestors out of Egypt, you came to the sea; and the Egyptians pursued your ancestors with chariots and horsemen to the Red Sea. ⁷ When they cried out to the Lord, he put darkness between you and the Egyptians, and made the sea come upon them and cover them; and your eyes saw what I did to Egypt. Afterwards you lived in the wilderness a long time. ⁸ Then I brought you to the land of the Amorites, who lived on the other side of the Jordan; they fought with you, and I handed them over to you, and you took possession of their land, and I destroyed them before you. ⁹ Then King Balak son of Zippor of Moab, set out to fight against Israel. He sent and invited Balaam son of Beor to curse you, ¹⁰ but I would not listen to Balaam; therefore he blessed you; so I rescued you out of his hand.

¹¹ When you went over the Jordan and came to Jericho, the citizens of Jericho fought against you, and also the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites; and I handed them over to you. ¹² I sent the hornet ahead of you, which drove out before you the two kings of the Amorites; it was not by your sword or by your bow. ¹³ I gave you a land on which you had not labored, and towns that you had not built, and you live in them; you eat the fruit of vineyards and olive yards that you did not plant.

¹⁴ “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. ¹⁵ 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.”

¹⁶ Then the people answered, “Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods; ¹⁷ 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;¹⁸ 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.”

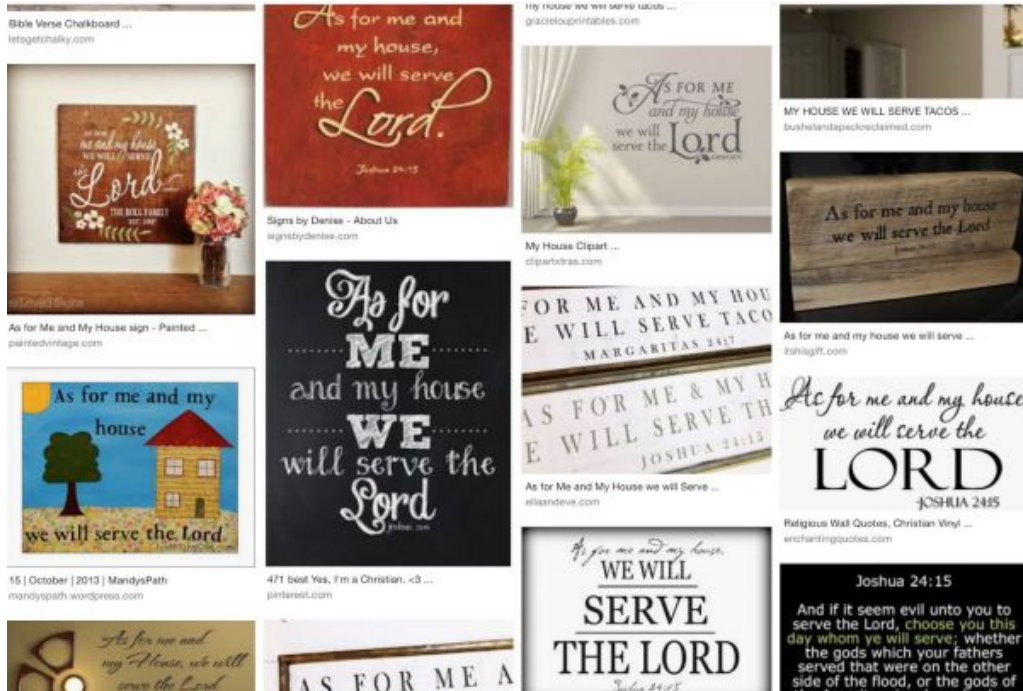
¹⁹ But Joshua said to the people, “You cannot serve the LORD, for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins. ²⁰ If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm, and consume you, after having done you good.” ²¹ And the people said to Joshua, “No, we will serve the LORD!” ²² 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.” ²³ He said, “Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your hearts to the LORD, the God of Israel.” ²⁴ The people said to Joshua, “The LORD our God we will serve, and him we will obey.” ²⁵ So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and made statutes and ordinances for them at Shechem. ²⁶ Joshua wrote these words in the book of the law of God; and he took a large stone, and set it up there under the oak in the sanctuary of the LORD. ²⁷ Joshua said to all the people, “See, this stone shall be a witness against us; for it has heard all the words of the LORD that he spoke to us; therefore it shall be a witness against you, if you deal falsely with your God.” ²⁸ So Joshua sent the people away to their inheritances.

Weeks ago, speaking of Noah, I said *covenant* wasn't the right word for the rainbow story, because in Genesis 6, God is the only one promising anything. Noah and his family agree to nothing. The only covenant made is by God, to God: *“when I see a rainbow in the sky, I'll remember that I promised not to kill you all no matter how much I want to.”*

Today's text, Joshua 24, is a true covenant story. God has kept a promise, and the people make a promise in return – a big promise. It's the Bible, so naturally everyone repeats the promise three times. Joshua writes it all down and then moves a stone beside a tree – also a Bible thing – and then declares, *“This stone shall be as a witness against you if you ever break your promise,”* he says, also three times. But hardly anybody remembers Joshua said that. Today we remember.

Let's pray. *If only we truly trusted, O God, that where you want to take us is where we most truly want to be, that how you choose to lead us is how we most truly want to go. For this wisdom and this courage we pray. Amen.*

Until this year, verse 15 was the only verse of Joshua I could quote from memory. And not because I've read it so often in the Bible, but because it was on a decoupage plaque in my in-laws' bathroom for all the years I knew them: *“As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”* You only have to google the first three words, *“As for me.”*



There are thousands. All of them for sale, of course, at sites with names like “hischild.com.” The problem – because you know I am always going to find a problem – is that verse 15 is not the end of the text; it’s not even a natural break in the text. It’s mid-conversation.

The natural break in the text is verse 28, “*Then Joshua dismissed the people, each to his own place of inheritance.*” Which, to no one’s surprise, is not a big seller at hischild.com. Nor is his parting declaration: “*This stone shall be a witness against us; a witness against you, if you deal falsely with your God.*” Emphasizing the Hebrew insinuation of the marriage covenant throughout the text, *The Message* translation reads, “*if you cheat on your God.*”

When I googled “*this stone shall*” I got a verse from Matthew 21 and lots of memes about kidney stones. “*This too shall pass. It may pass like a kidney stone, but it shall pass.*” But nothing from Joshua 24. Because, obviously, who wants to read *that*, stumbling into their in-laws’ bathroom first thing in the morning? Joshua isn’t decorating. He’s giving his own eulogy. When he dies, there will be none left who knew Egypt, only people who knew people who knew Egypt.

So much is lost. In time. In translation. They’ve arrived – Canaan; Promised Land. Of course they are happy, but they have no idea what they are doing; and they have no idea that they have no idea what they are doing. His eulogy is Joshua’s last effort at reminding them: where they came from, how they got here, what their choices are now. Jewish history calls this text “the covenant is renewed.” And while Christians since that time prefer to quote Joshua, we aren’t him.

I’m pretty sure the Jewish storytellers didn’t intend listeners to identify with him, the same way gospel writers didn’t intend us to identify with Jesus all the time – standing next to Jesus

pointing our own fingers at *those self-righteous Pharisees*. **WE** are the self-righteous Pharisees. And **we** are the wandering descendants of Abraham, people headed into an unknown future, forever tempted to glorify a past that is, at best, sketchy. And so, for the sake of faithfulness to the text, and for the sake of faithfulness in our lives and life together here and now, I suggest we sit not with Joshua, but with them, to listen. To listen and consider the choice Joshua presents them and to which they commit.

Choose this day whom you will serve. The two choices: God who brought you out of Egypt or Foreign God. Joshua has recited the history of their God, beginning with Abraham, and in the telling referred to some, but hardly all, of the available foreign gods from which they have to choose. *“Oh we choose the same God as you”* is their instant answer. Joshua argues back. *“It’s no small thing you are promising,”* he says; *“this God is jealous. This God punishes the worship of foreign gods.”* But they are unswayed. Why not, after all? God is finally on their side.

After forty years of wandering they’re home. They just whipped the Amorites, and they now occupy their land. What is not to love about this God now? Three times, Joshua argues. Three times, the people insist, *“We will serve the Lord only. God forbid that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods!”* God forbid, indeed! Again, from *The Message*, *“We’d never forsake God! Never! We’d never leave God to worship other gods!”* Three times, they say *“Never!”* When, of course, they did.

Everyone’s had that day of faith, the day we thought we’d never doubt God again. Days that sometimes didn’t even last a day. And the Hebrew people’s enthusiasm rings sad because we know they really meant it when they said it. And they truly believed they’d follow through. Because God had been so good that day or that week or that year, they let themselves believe that faith was something said and done. They had won a battle and thought the war against the Canaanites was over. In fact, it had hardly begun.

Who led Israel in the very last battle to drive out the very last Canaanites, do you remember? I’ve preached it a time or two. King David – defeating the Jebusites to take the ground that became Jerusalem. It was a long time after Joshua. Faith based only on past small victories will not sustain us in an unknown future. Nor does it promise to.

Faith comes as manna in the wilderness – daily and only enough for today. 14,600 days in the wilderness was meant to get them in the habit of trusting God one day at time. Turned out, that wasn’t enough days. And then, there were those other gods, the ones that Joshua mentions: Abraham’s originals, from back before, when he lived in Haran; and Egypt’s; and those belonging to the Amorites, so recently defeated. A foreign god is any other one, of course, any other one than the Creator and Sustainer of the universe, the one we are reading about here, the god in no way confined to the tiny thoughts and words we have to think and say. Anyone who is not the God of Joshua in the Old Testament, Jesus in the New. (By the way, *Joshua* and *Jesus* are the same name in Hebrew.)

Seems to me, Joshua's three examples make good archetypes of foreign gods of every time and place, including ours. Abraham's – back when he was Abram, son of Terah; Egypt's – the land of slavery; and the Amorites – recently defeated. I'm renaming these three foreign gods: 1. Possessions; 2. The Past; and 3, simply, Power.

Abram's people back in Haran carried their gods in their pockets or on a donkey's back. We know so from Jacob's story, remember. When he fled his Uncle Laban's farm, he stole Uncle Laban's gods. And when Uncle Laban caught them on the road, Jacob made Rachel sit on them in the ladies' tent, knowing her dad wouldn't look for them there. (If you'd like this explained in detail, you can ask me later.)

The things we carry in our pockets or somewhere else: money; toys; food in the fridge; the fridge itself; the roof over the fridge; the paid light bill that keeps the fridge cold; clothes, a car, a bank account. We may not bow down to them, but our very lives are bent to their getting and their keeping. At what point is it worship? Things are means, not ends – at least they're supposed to be. Except we, or me anyway, care which things we have. (Freegans?) The awesome thing about things, of course, is that they are so “*thingy*”; so touchable, tastable, visible: my flannel pajamas when I'm cold; things that I can touch and hug and pet and feel, that I can look at over and over and over again.

I can open my bank account online and know my rent and my lights and my gas tank are good for another month. OR I can open my bank account and know that they are NOT good at all. But I know exactly how *not good* they are. A student at Subway one day was counting all her pocket money to see if she could also have a drink with her lunch. Turned out, no – because the math was plain.

Things make promises we know they can't keep, but we settle for those broken promises more often than we admit, because things demand no trust from us. No patience and no faith. But they are dependable. There are there. I get why Jacob stole Laban's gods. They were insurance. Because, like it or not, the new God of Abraham wasn't always so predictable.

Remember how the Israelites remembered their past in Egypt? Not as slavery. Every time things got scary in freedom (aka wilderness), they begged Moses to take them back to the fleshpots of Egypt. The perfect past – the “good, old days” when life was easier, simpler, slower; people were better; cities were safer; children more respectful; TV was better, movies were better.

According to a story I read this week, the evening news was done right, back when Walter Cronkite reported it. When it was unbiased. “*He just told the truth.*” Why do we romanticize the past? Obviously, it's easier to bear, with the pain shaved off. We don't romanticize anything about the past more than we romanticize war. I saw in yesterday's paper IU ROTC cadets wearing WWI uniforms for homecoming. Really?

I've even had a little puppy fever lately. But luckily Rob and Erika got a puppy. and they have to walk him twenty times a day until he learns not to pee on the floor. So I don't want

a puppy now, because they reminded me what is true about puppies. Obviously, forgetting – or storing – past memory is a useful part of our brains' design. We couldn't function if a lifetime of pain, trauma, emotion was constantly replaying in our thoughts.

But I mean to speak spiritually – glorifying, worshipping, serving the past where God already did what God wanted done, through the lives of other people, who were not us. We live here and now. This is where God can use us. Only here and now can we hear and know God calling us. Here and now is the only time and place in which we can serve God.

Finally, there are the Amorites and the Hittites. (All week I've been saying *the gigabytes* instead of the Gergashites.) The occupants of Canaan. All those descendants of the son Noah cursed, the morning of his terrible hangover. I have no doubt why their gods would have been a temptation. They had towns and cities, protected by walls and armies. Power is what kept them safe. Economic power. Military power. What is not to love and want about that? Especially by a people who have never tasted it?

No foreign god will be harder for Israel to resist than this. The Amorites and gigabytes are just the beginning. When Egypt and Assyria go to war, the prophets remind Israel of the covenant, insisting that faithfulness to it forbids alliances, forbids them to pick a side. We are to trust in God alone. Which sounds very churchy and wise from here. Not so much to people who could hear Assyrian horses pawing the ground and snorting. And that really is the whole thing, isn't it? God says, "*Worship me only; serve me only; depend on me only. No matter what or who is at the door. No matter what promises they are making.*"

The people do their best to promise. But then, God appears to go to sleep for 400 years of slavery in Egypt and then act surprised when we humans are the teensiest bit tempted to cast our lot with the offers we can see and hear and taste and sign onto – the job with the biggest salary, the team with the biggest army, the leader who makes us feel the least afraid of the unknown future.

We know all those promises are likely to be broken. But we cast our lot all the same, simply because they are promises we can see and hear and touch, promises that more people than not around us are professing faith in too. And there's a certain certainty in that. Three times Joshua asks them to choose whom they will serve. Three times they promise the same: *The Lord our God*, they say, and they mean every word – from the very bottom of their hearts – being people just like us, hoping against hope that life will never be so hard again.

Joshua knows better, even if they don't. Three times he reminds them. Each reminder is also a warning, foreshadowing the entire story to come. Then, finally, he blessed them. Having done all he was meant to do, Joshua died. And the people's promise became their way of life, as much as it is ours.

Let's pray.