

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

DECISION DAY

Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18

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Analysis by Paul Jaster

1Then 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.2And 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.14Now 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.15Now 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."16Then the people answered, "Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods;17for 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;18and 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."

DIAGNOSIS: Too Often We Make the Wrong Choice

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Decision Day*

Today we are witnesses to one of the most solemn, sacred, and dramatic moments in the history of God's people, Israel. This was another one of those great decision days, when Israel was forced to make a choice. And what a sight that must have been. All 12 tribes of Israel gathered at a place called Shechem (half on the hill to the north, half on the hill to the south). But as we peek in on this great family reunion, do not let any of us suppose that we are only witnesses, spectators who are uninvolved, detached, indifferent. We are there! We are participants in this dramatic moment! Joshua is in our midst this day. Calling us to decision. "Choose this day whom you will serve." "As for me and for my household, we will serve the Lord."

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Do We Have a Choice?*

And yet, do we like the choices offered? Martin Luther cut through a lot of nonsense when in his *Large Catechism* he said that a "god" is that to which our heart clings. In our heads we think that we are "free" and that we serve no one but ourselves and our own pleasure. That we have inalienable rights: life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. But in the thought-world of the Scriptures, we are always bound to someone or something. There are many "gods," there are many "lords." And everybody's got one. Even in this post-modern age, everybody has a "god" they serve of one sort or another. The only question is: "Which 'god' will we serve? Which 'god' do we trust? In whom or in what do we put our faith, hope and love? Joshua and others in the Scriptures are relentless and will not let us off the hook until that choice is made.

But is there, in fact, a choice? Can a leopard change its spots? The tribes of Israel said, "We will serve the Lord!" But Joshua replied, "You cannot serve the Lord. For whenever you have made your choice, your choice has been the wrong one. You made your vows and promises, but always kept the back door open and held your false gods in reserve." Dare we affirm that we will serve the Lord when it is evident that Christians in this decade are only interested in personal convenience and taking care of their "religious obligations" with as little effort as possible?

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Life or Death, Blessing or Curse*

One's answer to Joshua's challenge is a matter of "blessing or curse" and "life or death." The historical & geographical setting of Shechem tells us that. The village of Shechem lies on a "saddle" or a pass that sits between two mountains, which makes of it a wonderful natural amphitheater. It also sits at the intersection of the major north-south and east-west crossroads in the middle of central Palestine. The wide pathways make a "cross" that connects north and south, east and west. To the north is Mount Ebal, bald and barren (because it faces south towards the blistering sun). To the south is Mount Gerizim, lush and forested (because it faces north and is sheltered from the sun).

Moses declared Mount Ebal to be the Mount of Curse and ordered six tribes to sit on its slope at times of covenant renewal to have their Levites shout out the "curses" that come with not keeping their covenant with God. And Moses declared Mount Gerizim to be the Mount of Blessing and ordered the other six tribes to sit on its slope at times of covenant renewal to have their Levites shout out the "blessings" that come with keeping their covenant with God (Deuteronomy 11:29; 27:12). And so just this site alone provides its own compelling "object lesson." Serve the Lord and you will live a blessed life, with God doing

good to you. Serve some other “god” and you will live a cursed life, with God doing you harm and consuming you.

PROGNOSIS: Christ Makes the Right Choice...Always!

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Christ Chooses to Serve Us and Our Neighbor*

In Jesus Christ, however, we have another “Joshua” (Jesus = Joshua), God’s Son in human flesh, who (of his own free will) chooses to serve both God and neighbor. He bears the brokenness and the curse of our bad choices upon the very center of his cross road—the cross. He connects northerners and southerners, the easterners and westerners. And he returns our anger, resentment, mockery, pain, and sorrow with a blessing. Jesus reverses the first covenant’s threat: “God will not forgive your transgressions or sins.” God will “do you harm, and consume you” (Josh. 24:19-20).

At Jacob’s well near Shechem, Jesus tells a Samaritan woman of the new covenant’s blessing: “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water. ... Those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life” (John 4). Our life or death, and curse or blessing, before God is not bound to the old covenant occasionally renewed at Shechem. Rather, it is bound to our faith (or lack of it) in Christ. We have no other choice. Not if we would live.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *We Choose God, Through Christ*

Nor, is our worship of God tied to a place, but to a person and his Spirit. The Judeans snobbishly insisted that Mount Zion, chosen by King David, was the only true place to worship God. The Samaritans countered that Mount Gerizim was a better place

to worship God because (A) this is where Abraham first entered the land of promise, (B) the patriarchs, especially Jacob and Joseph, centered here, (C) this was the 12 tribes' site for covenant renewal, and (D) this was an old site for central worship for the Israelites, one that pre-dated Jerusalem. But Jesus declared that worship is not bound to either hill. Rather, they are replaced by Jesus on the cross at Mount Calvary. Our obedience is bound not to a place, but to a person and his Spirit—faith in the faithfulness of God in the crucified and raised Christ, in all the places that he walked, including in our hearts today. We choose God, by choosing to serve Christ and neighbors, in truth and in Spirit.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *We Are Witnesses*

“Choose this day whom you will serve.” This is a big decision—as large as life and death. But, the decision to serve the Lord is not reserved for special, solemn, sacred days only. It is made each and every day, a hundred times in life's routine—as we let our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ lead us and guide us in each and every step along the way. And we can give witness to what God in Christ has already done in our time, our place, our history, and our future. You may not be able to testify for others. But you can give witness for yourself and for your household. “Choose this day whom you will serve; but for me and for my household, we will serve the Lord.” This is one of those great decision days, and the choice is before you once again. What will your decision be?