

It's Always Time to Choose

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

3rd in a four-part series

July 20, 2014

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Joshua 1:1–9 (NIV)

After the death of Moses the servant of the LORD, the LORD said to Joshua son of Nun, Moses' aide: ²“Moses my servant is dead. Now then, you and all these people, get ready to cross the Jordan River into the land I am about to give to them—to the Israelites. ³I will give you every place where you set your foot, as I promised Moses. ⁴Your territory will extend from the desert to Lebanon, and from the great river, the Euphrates—all the Hittite country—to the Mediterranean Sea in the west. ⁵No one will be able to stand against you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you. ⁶Be strong and courageous, because you will lead these people to inherit the land I swore to their ancestors to give them.

⁷“Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go. ⁸Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful. ⁹Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go.”

[Much of Canaan has been conquered. But before allowing the tribes to disperse to the land allotted to each, Joshua tells the Israelites that the time has again come for them to make a choice.]

Joshua 24:14–24 (NIV)

¹⁴“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. ¹⁵But 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.”

¹⁶Then the people answered, “Far be it from us to forsake the LORD to serve other gods! ¹⁷It 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. ¹⁸And 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.”

¹⁹Joshua said to the people, “You are not able to serve the LORD. He is a holy God; he is a jealous God. He will not forgive your rebellion and your sins. ²⁰If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, he will turn and bring disaster on you and make an end of you, after he has been good to you.”

²¹But the people said to Joshua, “No! We will serve the LORD.”

²²Then Joshua said, “You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen to serve the LORD.”

“Yes, we are witnesses,” they replied.

²³“Now then,” said Joshua, “throw away the foreign gods that are among you and yield your hearts to the LORD, the God of Israel.”

²⁴And the people said to Joshua, “We will serve the LORD our God and obey him.”

Our lives are made up of countless choices and our character is revealed in the choices we make. The most important choice we make is whether to place our trust in God.

Last week, we saw that after fleeing slavery in Egypt, the Israelites followed God to his mountain in the Sinai wilderness. There, God gave them his Law, his teaching, enabling God to dwell with them and lead them to Canaan, the land God had promised to Abraham and his descendants. After setting out, the tribes made a beeline for Canaan. When they arrived, they sent in some spies, who came back and reported on the terrors that awaited them if they attempted to conquer the Canaanites. All the spies, except for Joshua and Caleb, urged them to turn back. God had promised them the land, but rather than trusting God, the people listened to their own fears and

turned away (Numbers 14), at which point God told them that they would wander in the wilderness until that faithless generation had passed away. The next generation would be the ones who would enter and conquer Canaan.

During the time of wandering (forty years), Miriam, Moses' sister, and Aaron, Moses' brother would die. Even Moses himself would not be allowed to enter Canaan. He can see the Promised Land before his death, but he will never step foot in it (Deuteronomy 34).

Joshua and Caleb, the two spies who urged the Israelites to trust God forty years before, are allowed to enter Canaan. God chooses Joshua as his representative and his senior commander on the ground. God also instructs Joshua that the Israelite males are all to be circumcised before they undertake the conquest of Canaan, for the practice had been abandoned in the wilderness, driving home the people's distance from God during their wandering. When all is ready and the people have committed themselves anew, God dries up the Jordan River, reminiscent of the Exodus, and the people cross over to begin their war of conquest.

The war stories in the book of Joshua fall very hard on the ears of Christian, for we wonder where we see Jesus in any of it. But, I suppose, the book of Joshua reflects the realities of a hard and sinful world. If the people of God are to have a home, the land will have to be taken from someone – and it is.

When the necessary cities have been conquered and their kings defeated, the land is allocated to the various twelve tribes. But before the people head to their new homes, Joshua reminds them who they are and of all that God has done for them. They must make a choice now: Will they really choose God? Will they obey God and serve him? The time has come to stop flirting with other gods. It is time to choose.

But haven't they already chosen, we might ask? Yes, they have. But they must choose today, tomorrow, and the next day. This business of choosing to trust God, to obey him, and to serve him is never done. As Paul puts it, we must continue to work out our salvation (Philippians 2:12). Like the Israelites, we have been saved and we are being saved.

Choosing

A few years ago, when making one of several trips to the airport, I noticed a new billboard on the side of the highway. Erected by a local church, it read, "We are defined by our dreams." Though well-intentioned, I think the sentiment expressed on the billboard is wrong. We are not defined by our dreams; instead, we are defined by our choices, by what we do, by the many decisions we make throughout our lives. Sometimes the choice we make is small and has few consequences. Sometimes the choice is obviously important, carrying enormous consequences. Perhaps the trickiest choices are the ones that seem so trivial at the time, but can actually change the direction of our lives.

Joshua wants the Israelites to know that they must make a conscious choice to trust God and to serve him. It won't do to just stumble from day-to-day, never really committing one's self to God and his way. After taking control of lands that would become part of Israel, Joshua knew that he and the Israelites were confronted with many competing religions and deities, some of which must have been pretty attractive. They had a choice to make. Would they serve the Lord God, who had brought them this far, or, would they turn to some of the enticing idols around them? After reciting the sacred history of Israel (Joshua 24:1-13), Joshua put the choice to them quite plainly. Joshua told God's people that he and his family had chosen God – would they do the same? The Israelites chose that day to serve God, though staying true to their choice proved to be difficult, even impossible.

Will we make the same choice? Will recommit ourselves to God, who has chosen to make himself known to us in the person of Jesus? We too are tempted with many attractive and enticing alternatives.

The alternatives that lay before Joshua and his fellow Israelites were the pagan gods of the Canaanites, Baal, Astarte, and the rest. The alternatives that tempt us are more subtle. Few among the congregation of St. Andrew or any other church in America are tempted by Islam, Judaism, Mormonism, Buddhism or Scientology. Instead, we are tempted to choose and to serve a god made in our own image, a Jesus that seems right to us, a Christianity that makes sense to us and affirms us.

This story of Joshua's choice is a good occasion to revisit what is happening to the Christian faith in pews across America.

A Christless Christianity¹

One of the most important research studies of religion and faith in recent years is the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR), led by Christian Smith from the University of North Carolina. I won't bore you with the details of their methodology, but it is a very well done study, better than most. They did phone surveys with several thousand older youth, tracked them over a period of years, and supplemented the phone surveys with in-depth interviews of hundreds of them. It is the sort of research you can actually have confidence in.

Recognizing that the faith of teenagers and young adults tends to reflect that of their parents, Smith and his colleagues came to some startling conclusions, including:

We have come with some confidence to believe that a significant part of Christianity in the United States is actually only tenuously Christian in any sense that it is seriously connected to the actual historical Christian tradition. . . . It is not so much that U. S. Christianity is being secularized. Rather, more subtly, Christianity is either degenerating into a pathetic version of itself, or more significantly, Christianity is being colonized and displaced by quite a different religious tradition.²

Based on their research, Smith found the key tenets of this new "Christianity" to be:

- A god exists who created and ordered the world and watches over human life on earth.
- God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
- The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
- God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.
- Good people go to heaven when they die.

Smith calls this new faith "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism" or simply "MTD."

Look over these five tenets and ask yourself what, or better, *who* is missing? Of course: Jesus is missing! According to this version of "Christianity" there is no need for Jesus. Sure we might need some help from time to time, and it is handy that God is there to lend a hand, but we don't need a rescue from our sinfulness. Sin has no place in MTD.

And what constitutes the "good" we are supposed to do so we can go to heaven. "Be nice." That's it, the sum of human morality and the Judeo-Christian ethic across three millenia. Be nice. Smith gets it right when he calls this new faith "pathetic."

¹ This section is taken from the Weekly Bible Study for the week of September 25, 2011 and is incorporated into my book, *Restart: Getting Past Christian-ish*.

² Smith and his colleagues have produced two books detailing their findings: *Soul Searching: The religious and spiritual lives of American teenagers* and, later, *Souls in Transition: The religious and spiritual lives of emerging adults*. As you can tell by the titles, the books reflect the on-going tracking of these people as they got older.

Another NSYR researcher, Kenda Creasy Dean, calls MTD a parasite, living off Christianity, but slowly weakening it and eventually destroying it. She calls MTD “Christian-ish” not Christian.³

MTD is a Christless Christianity, as if there could be such a thing. She writes, “Why do teenagers practice Moralistic Therapeutic Deism? Not because they have misunderstood what we have taught them in church. *They practice it because this is what we have taught them in church.*” Gulp.

Need a bit more? Scot McKnight works extensively with young adults and has for fifteen years. He writes, “Reared on self-esteem and impervious to guilt, the next generation needs good news that can break through their defenses.” McKnight goes on to say that you can’t talk about sin and grace to someone reared on Mister Rogers⁴ and “I’m Ok, You’re Ok.” Even more telling is this, “iGens have a robust enough self-image to think Jesus is just like them.”⁵

It’s Always Time to Choose

God formed a family in and through Abraham, a family through whom God would restore humanity to himself. This has required God to save this family time and again – from childlessness, from famine, from slavery, and more. The Israelites had been saved from bondage and they were being saved again and again, in ways they saw and in ways they did not. Likewise, the biblical writers tell us that they were challenged to renew their covenant with God, to choose God again and again.

So it is with us. There is more to our journey with God than making a decision for Jesus at youth camp. We must “work out our salvation,” choosing God and his ways every single day. The temptation to take an exit ramp is always there; exciting and glittering baubles entice to make our own way, to be captains of our own souls, to listen to our own heart. But we must strive to listen to God’s heart and shape our choices in such a way that we may be renewed and transformed. This is God’s work and our own.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Sometimes in life, choices that seem very important at the time turn out to be pretty inconsequential. What are some decisions you’ve made in your own life that seemed huge at the time, but in hindsight, really weren’t very significant? On the other hand, sometimes small choices sneak up on us and we fail to see the consequences of our decision? What are some examples, from your own life, of small decisions that turned out to have big consequences?
2. Some people have a view of life in which they have little control over what happens to them. Every choice, every consequence, is thrust on them from the outside, even from God. Other people believe that they are in control of nearly every part of their life – their future is a direct consequence of their own decisions. What is your own view? How much control do you have over your life? Has your perspective on this changed? What do you think the biblical view is?
3. We live in a world that wants to drown us in decisions. Even supermarket shelves can present an intimidating array of choices. Discuss how we might begin to sort through all the decisions we face. Can they be categorized? Which categories deserve more attention? Does God care equally about them all? How can we simplify things a little?

³ From her book, *Almost Christian*, recently published by Oxford University Press. Dean is an associate professor at Princeton Seminary.

⁴ It is worth remembering that Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood went on national television in 1968. The original publication date of the book, *I’m Ok, You’re Ok* was in 1967. Both more than forty years ago.

⁵ From McKnight’s article, “The Gospel for iGens,” in *Leadership* journal, summer, 2009. McKnight is a much-published New Testament scholar and theologian from Northpark University.

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

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| Monday, Genesis 16 Sarai wants an heir for Abram and she chooses to take matters into her own hands. | Tuesday, Job 2:1-10 Job chooses to keep his trust in God. |
| Wednesday, 2 Samuel 11 King David chooses to send for Bathsheba and then chooses to order the murder of her husband | Thursday, Luke 19:1-10 A rich tax-collector, Zacchaeus, chooses to make a complete commitment to Jesus. |
| Friday, Acts 5:27-42 Peter and the Apostles choose to defy the Jewish leadership a second time. | Prayer List |

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible. On occasion Scott has to cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

The Gospel According to Hollywood

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