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Making Choices

To help us examine the life-shaping choices that we make, as individuals and communities, to be in covenant with God and with one another

Key Bible reference: Joshua 24

Key Verse: Joshua 24.15

Bible Background

Joshua 24 is the climactic chapter of the Book of Joshua. The chapter is divided into two parts: (1) verses 1-28, the report of a ceremony in which Israel formally enters into, or perhaps renews, a covenant with God, and (2) verses 29-33, a series of concluding notes on the deaths and burials of several Israelite leaders. It is the first part of Joshua 24 that we will cover in this lesson.

The story of the covenant ceremony at Shechem [SHEK-uhm] reported in Joshua 24:1-28 is in two sections. First, in verses 1-13, through the mouth of Joshua the Lord summarizes the gracious actions that God has performed on behalf of the Israelites in the past. Then, in verses 14-28, Joshua declares his own and his household's covenant loyalty to the Lord and challenges the rest of the people of Israel to make the same commitment.

This lesson focuses on this covenant between God and Israel. Joshua 24:25 summarizes by saying that "Joshua [presumably on behalf of the Lord] made a covenant with the people that day, and made statutes and ordinances for them at Shechem." The lesson challenges us, as individuals and as communities, to examine the life-shaping choices that we make to be in covenant with God and with one another.

In the Old Testament, covenants can be of two kinds. On the one hand, some covenants are

agreements between parties of equal power and authority. Of this kind are covenants between two individuals, such as the pact between Laban [LAY-buhn] and Jacob (Genesis 31:43-54), and covenants between two rulers, such as the commercial agreement between King Solomon and King Hiram (1 Kings 5:1-12). On the other hand, some covenants are pacts between one very powerful party and a second weaker party. In covenants of this kind, the more powerful party demands the loyalty and exclusive service of the weaker party. At the same time, the more powerful party promises to protect and care for the weaker party. An example of this kind of covenant would be the pact between Israel and Gibeon [GIB-ee-uhn] recorded in Joshua 9.

It is this second type of covenant, an agreement between a great and powerful party on the one hand and a weak and powerless party on the other, that the Bible has in mind when it describes the relationship between God and humans as a "covenant." God demands loyalty and exclusive service from human beings. In turn, God pledges to protect and care for the people who are in covenant.

The Book of Deuteronomy declares (11:26-32; 27:1-8) that once the Hebrews arrive in the Promised Land, they should gather at Shechem, in the valley between Mount Gerizim [GER-uh-zim] and Mount Ebal [EE-buhl], and renew their covenant with God. Joshua 8:30-35 and our text

for today from Joshua 24 describe the fulfillment of this command.

Our scripture highlights the covenant between God and the people of God that was ratified at Shechem. Recognize that Israel is given the opportunity at Shechem to ponder its past, analyze its present, and consider its future in the land, among the peoples already living there.

Joshua 24:1-2. The opening verses of our Bible Lesson, Joshua 24:1-2, set the stage for the ceremony of covenant ratification. "Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and summoned" the leaders of Israel. Together, "they presented themselves before God."

Shechem, identified with the modern site of Tell Balatah, is located forty-one miles north of Jerusalem in a valley between Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal. Use a map to locate this site. Scripture records no "battle of Shechem" between the local Canaanite population and the Israelites. So it seems that the Israelites gained control of Shechem through peaceful means, perhaps as the result of a treaty or pact. Perhaps some of the Hebrew ancestors had remained in Shechem and had not gone down to Egypt; so in Joshua's time, all that was necessary was to establish or renew ties.

Verses 11-16. As noted earlier, Joshua 24:1-28 can be divided into parts: verses 1-13, which summarize the gracious actions of God on behalf of the Israelites in fulfillment of the divine side of the covenant, and verses 14-28, which affirm Joshua and his household's covenant loyalty to the Lord and challenge the Israelites to make the same commitment. The second section of our printed text from Joshua 24, verses 11-16, bridges these two parts. Verses 11-13 are the concluding verses of the

summary of God's gracious actions on behalf of the people of God in fulfillment of the divine side of the covenant. Verses 14-16 contain the report of Joshua and his household's declaration of covenant loyalty to God, a challenge to the people of God to declare their covenant loyalty to the Lord, and the first affirmation of covenant loyalty by the people.

The meaning of the reference in verse 12 to "the hornet" that God sent ahead of the Israelites is not at all clear. In fact, the correct translation of the Hebrew word that is used, *tsirah* [tsir-AW], is uncertain. In Exodus 23:28, where the same Hebrew word is used and is translated "pestilence," God promises to send this mysterious power to aid the Hebrews against the Canaanite powers. Some scholars have argued that the word hornet alludes to the power of the pharaoh of Egypt, while others have maintained it refers to the use of insects in warfare. Whatever the exact meaning of the term, it seems clear that we are to understand Joshua 24:11-12 as speaking of the fulfillment of the promise God made to the Israelites in Exodus 23:28: to send an awesome power that would go before them and vanquish all opposition.

The words at the end of verse 12 reminded the Hebrews listening to Joshua (and remind us today) that it is not human warriors who win the battles, it is the Lord. The verse flatly declares that "it was not by your sword or by your bow" that the struggles against the Canaanites were won. Rather, it was through the power of God. Verse 13 continues the thought, affirming that it was the power of God that gave the Israelites the land. With descriptive power, the writer tells the gathered people that they had not labored for the land they now occupied; they had not built the

towns they now inhabited; and they had not planted the vineyards whose produce they now enjoyed. No; all was a gift from God. And these were just the latest of God's gracious actions on behalf of the Israelites in fulfillment of the divine side of the covenant. This "telling of the story" was a public testimony; and the Israelites' subsequent acceptance of the covenant with God was an affirmation of the story as their testimony.

In Joshua 24:14, the focus shifts to the human side of the covenant. This verse summarizes the covenant obligations of the people of God with a twofold directive: First, "Revere the LORD"; and second, "Serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness."

The last line of verse 14 makes it clear that the covenant between God and the people of God is an exclusive covenant. The people are to "revere the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness"—and only the Lord. All other gods—all other things that can compete for worship, allegiance, and service—are to be disregarded and "put away." The biblical writer recognizes that Israel's ancestors in Egypt had worshiped pagan deities before the time of Moses. But the time had come for a clear decision.

Joshua 24:15 is the climactic moment of Joshua's address to the people. It presents them with a choice: to be in covenant with the Lord, or, if not with the Lord, with "the gods" whom their "ancestors served in the region beyond the River" (that is, the Euphrates River in Mesopotamia; see verse 2)"or [with] the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living."

There is an urgency in Joshua 24:14-15. Verse 14 begins with "Now therefore." Verse 15 opens with "Now" and contains Joshua's

challenge to the people to "choose this day." Things would have to be different from this point on in the people's relationship with God. The Israelites were henceforth to respond in service, not simply to one god among others, but to the God who had brought them to this point in their history.

Verse 15 contains not only Joshua's challenge to others but his own declaration of loyalty as well. He sets the example for the Israelites by affirming his personal commitment to the covenant between the Lord and the people of Israel. "As for me and my household," Joshua proclaims, "we will serve the LORD." In Israelite society, the adult male head of household would make the choice for his family. But, although Joshua was the leader of the people as a whole, each head of household would have to choose for himself.

As verses 14 and 15 indicate the urgency of the decision, verse 16 reveals the intensity of the response. Even before they have formally entered into the covenant, the people passionately acknowledge their standing before God. The Hebrew text conveys that the Israelites understand themselves to be defiled or profaned—some scholars suggest damned—if they serve other gods.

Verses 22-25. The third passage in our Bible Lesson repeats Joshua's challenge to the people to enter into or renew an exclusive covenant with the Lord: to "put away the foreign gods ... and incline your hearts to the LORD" (verse 23). In verse 24, the people affirm their covenant loyalty to the Lord. The passage concludes with the declaration that "Joshua [acting as God's intermediary] made a covenant with the people that day ... at Shechem." However, throughout the exchanges between Joshua and the people the people continually pledged their obedience,

while Joshua continually questioned their willingness and ability to obey. Thus, even at the close of the covenant ceremony, there is a suggestion of Israel's future disobedience.

Prayer

O holy God of the covenant, help us to keep our commitments to you and to one another in the face of all the challenges to covenant loyalty in the world today. We pray in the name of Jesus, who was obedient unto death. Amen.