

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Broadcast Date: 19 June 2005

No. T0371

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Memorable Choices: Joshua: Joshua 24:15

Sometimes I find myself saying something which seems to be a contradiction of terms. For instance, did you know, have you noticed, what I would call some of the Major Monosyllabic Messages in the Bible? Of course, when you think about it, that is much less complicated than it sounds. Many of the concepts in the Bible are so abstract, so deep and so full of meaning, that they cannot be explained briefly in a short, terse statement. Yet, paradoxically, some of the most important statements of all are so vital that God has seen to it that we are not given the excuse of hiding behind any real or imagined weakness in our understanding of our own mother tongue. That is, some of the most important statements in the Bible are so vital that they are phrased in short, simple words of one syllable. Or, as I would put it, they are Major Monosyllabic Messages.

To simplify things even further, God has given us another way of recognising them, not now in words, but in numbers. Think about it. What a wonderful statement of truth is given in 1 John 4:17, in nine words, each of one syllable. 'As He is, so are we in this world.' Nine words; three times three! Think again. Philippians 1:21: 'For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain'. Twelve words of one syllable! Four times three! Think again. Luke 19:10: 'For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost.' Sixteen words, each of one syllable! Four times four!

Now for our present meditation. "Choose you this day whom ye will serve ... but, as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." Each word of one syllable, but how telling! Twenty little words! Five times four! What a wealth of meaning, wisdom and sound advice! In all, what a wonderful group of pithy statements from God's precious word! Every one of them in simple words of one syllable! In ascending order, God gives these dramatic little sermonettes to us. Three times three! Four times three! Four times four! Lastly, five times four! Marvellous! The best Book to read is the Bible. Without a shadow of doubt!

If you are a regular listener, and I do most sincerely hope you are, you will know that we are currently thinking about well-known people, certainly in Bible terms, each of whom made, or had to make, a memorable choice. Today, we are going to think about Joshua, who was used of God to bring the nation of Israel into the Promised Land of Canaan. However, I am jumping the gun a little in starting so far on into the story. Let us go back a bit, so as to get the story in proper perspective.

This was not by any means the first time Joshua had been involved in a national crisis. After the people of Israel had been slaves in Egypt for over 400 years, God delivered them out of the clutches of Pharaoh, the ruler of Egypt. He then guided them through the wilderness, or rather a series of wildernesses, for a long, testing period of about 40 years. During that period, God appointed Moses as His spokesman to His earthly people. When that expired, the time had come for God to bring them into their own eventual homeland, in what we now call Palestine. For several reasons that do not concern us today, it was appropriate for God, at that stage, to bring in another leader, Joshua. He was to take the place of Moses, who had done a tremendous job in leading God's earthly people for over 40 years. Moses was, however, given the privilege of being shown The Promised Land from the top of a mountain, as we read in Deuteronomy 32:48-52, and 34:1. The Bible records the fact that, after a long, extremely busy and active life of one hundred and twenty years, it could still be said of Moses, "his eye was not dim, nor his natural force abated" (Deuteronomy 34:7). Because of that, he was able, with God's help, to view the Promised Land, from a great height, and survey it all with total clarity in one breath-taking view. Nevertheless, a new phase in the life of the nation required a new leader. It was time for someone else, Joshua, to take over the new responsibility of conducting God's people into the Promised Land.

What do we actually know about Joshua? Let us put together a few things scripture says about him. The first we hear about him is given in Exodus 17:9, where we are told that when battle was about to be joined with Amalek, Moses singled out Joshua and said to him, "Choose us out men, and go out, fight with Amalek: tomorrow, I will stand on the top of the hill with the rod of God in mine hand." The rod was the symbol of the sovereign choice and power of God and of Moses as His appointed leader. It was that rod which Moses had held out to part the waters of the Red Sea, as related in Exodus 14. The battle with Amalek was engaged in accordance with Moses' instructions and duly won. Joshua learned, that day, that intercession with God is the true precursor to real victory over the enemies of God and His people.

Also, at the beginning of the wilderness journey, Moses had decided to select a representative from each of the tribes of Israel, and commission them to spy out The Promised Land in advance of the whole nation venturing on the next phase of their journey towards Canaan. Moses instructed the spies to report back to him what the prospects were. Out of the twelve spies, only two came back with a positive, favourable report about what they had seen.

As we encourage the children to sing;

*Twelve men went to spy out Canaan,
Ten were bad, two were good.
Some saw giants great and tall,
Some saw grapes in clusters fall,
Some saw God was in it all,
Ten were bad, two were good.*

The only two who were willing to look at God's wonderful provision, rather than the size and number of the enemies, were Caleb and Joshua. Because of this, out of about six hundred thousand adult men whom God delivered out of slavery in Egypt, only those two, Joshua and Caleb, gained entry into the promised land of Canaan. In token of their faithfulness and faith on that occasion, God promised that He would eventually bring both of them safely into Canaan. And He did! God is no man's debtor. On the other hand, not only the ten pessimistic spies, but also all the rest of the adult men who came out of Egypt, would perish in the wilderness. Scripture says specifically that this was because of their unbelief (Hebrews 3:17-19). On a personal level, Joshua, and also Caleb, learned from that experience that each victory gained with the help of God, each step, however short, taken in faith, gives added moral strength to face the next test that will surely come along. So it was with Joshua, and also, no doubt, Caleb. When the time finally came to enter into the inheritance, Joshua did not waver.

So then, when the moment arrived for Moses to appoint and announce a successor to himself, there was no doubt in his mind who the appropriate person should be. In any case, the instruction of God was quite clear. "And the Lord said unto Moses, Take thee Joshua the son of Nun, a man in whom is the spirit, and lay thine hand upon him" (Numbers 27:18). And again, in Deuteronomy 1:38, "The Lord said unto Moses, Joshua the son of Nun, which standeth before thee, he shall go in thither. Encourage him, for he shall cause Israel to inherit (the Land)." We are not surprised that when Moses died, God said to Joshua, "Moses, My servant is dead ... As I was with Moses, so I will be with thee."

When the final test came, the moral strength that had been tested, proven to be true, and developed, stood Joshua in good stead. Because he himself had faced up to moral challenge as he encountered it, he was able to speak to the people with forthright directness. "Choose you this day whom ye will serve...but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

He did not press on others a choice he was not prepared to face up to himself. Joshua had the faith to take God at his word. That really is what faith is. Faith takes God at His word, because He is God. God is faithful (1 Corinthians 1:9). He is absolutely consistent with what He declares Himself to be. Faith accepts that and acts upon it. Faith accepts that God will carry out what He promises, because He is God. You will remember that is exactly what is recorded of Abraham in Romans 4:20-21: "Abraham was strong in faith, giving glory to God; and being fully persuaded that, what (God) had promised, He was able also to perform." Joshua in his day also had personal faith, and not only for himself. His attitude was, "If this is right and best for me, it must be right and best for my wife and family."

How big a family did Joshua have? We aren't told. How old was each member of his family? We aren't told. But what we are told makes it abundantly plain that he had the utmost concern for those who were nearest and dearest to him. I am sure that we can all identify ourselves with him in that. That interest and concern begins, certainly for the Christian, even before our children are born, and lasts as long as we live. It was not that Joshua was a domineering person, determined to boss his family into doing what he wanted, regardless of their own feelings or conscience. It is fundamental to the family unit that the head of the family has a great responsibility to give the best possible leadership and guidance to his wife and family.

I well remember the day the youngest of my three daughters was married. I took the opportunity to give some practical advice to my new son-in-law, no doubt at least some of it tongue-in-cheek. I also took the opportunity to tell the assembled company, "I have no intention of giving my daughter any advice today. If I have allowed her to get to the age of almost twenty two years old without making her aware of what I consider to be important in life, it is far too late for me to start telling her now."

I am quite sure that it would be the same with Joshua and his family. They would know full well what he considered to be important, and what he viewed as right and wrong. I am sure they would exhibit that happy blend of mutual love

and respect that is vital to balanced family life. What his family knew of him would, I am sure, give them full confidence in him and in his judgment. Would to God that were true of every one of us!

Quite clearly, Joshua, with his experience of life, considered it paramount to put God first in everything. "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

This personal sense of commitment, so expressed, is very important. Remember the Psalmist's cry in Psalm 55:16: "As for me, I will call upon God, and the Lord will save me." The Psalms give us the feelings of godly men under various kinds and degrees of pressure that arise in all aspects of life on earth. That is why they are expressed in that personal individual way with which we can so readily identify, when we in our turn are under stress. Furthermore, decisions we make in life affect our future course, and might well have life-long repercussions. Mistakes we make might well be repented of later. We might well learn valuable lessons from the experience. Nevertheless, each mistake made might well cause damage which will leave a scar for the rest of our lives. Even worse, something I do, or am responsible for, might well scar not only me, but also my family, in a way that can never be fully eradicated. That is why it is so important to make the right decisions, and have the right motives. I would say that Joshua had these things very much in mind when he said, "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." Notice that this confession is made in the context of the exhortation he delivered to the whole nation God had appointed him to lead. He did not press upon others an issue he wasn't prepare to face up to for himself and his loved ones.

After the death of Joshua, we read in Judges 1:1, 'Now after the death of Joshua, it came to pass that the children asked the Lord, saying, "Who shall go up for us against the Canaanites first, to fight against them?" When he had been removed from them, they realised full well what a magnificent leader he had been. But, before he left them, at the end of an extended and finally successful campaign to occupy the land that God had given them, Joshua gathered the people together. He gives them his final counsel and challenges them as to the measure of their commitment to the God who had brought them thus far.

We cannot do better than hear once more the way the scriptures themselves put it in Joshua 23:1-11: "And it came to pass a long time after that the LORD had given rest unto Israel from all their enemies round about, that Joshua waxed old and stricken in age. And Joshua called for all Israel, and for their elders, and for their heads, and for their judges, and for their officers, and said unto them, I am old and stricken in age: And ye have seen all that the LORD your God hath done unto all these nations because of you; for the LORD your God is he that hath fought for you. Behold, I have divided unto you by lot these nations that remain, to be an inheritance for your tribes, from Jordan, with all the nations that I have cut off, even unto the great sea westward. And the LORD your God, he shall expel them from before you, and drive them from out of your sight; and ye shall possess their land, as the LORD your God hath promised unto you. Be ye therefore very courageous to keep and to do all that is written in the book of the law of Moses, that ye turn not aside therefrom to the right hand or to the left; But cleave unto the LORD your God, as ye have done unto this day. For the LORD hath driven out from before you great nations and strong: but as for you, no man hath been able to stand before you unto this day. One man of you shall chase a thousand: for the LORD your God, he it is that fighteth for you, as he hath promised you. Take good heed therefore unto yourselves, that ye love the LORD your God".

And then he comes to the climax in 24:15: "Choose you this day whom ye will serve...but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

What a tribute to his leadership! Judges 2:7 tells us, "And the people served the Lord all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua, who had seen all the great works of the Lord, that he did for Israel" while they were under Joshua's leadership. True leadership involves preparing the next generation to take over responsibility. Joshua showed wise leadership when he demonstrated that true leadership is mainly by example, not instead of but as well as teaching and exhortation. He was not afraid to challenge his hearers. But he re-emphasised that he was not pressing on others anything he was not prepared to live out in his own life and service.

What an exhortation! What an example! "Choose you this day whom ye will serve... but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." A memorable choice indeed!

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