

I.N.I.

Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost
October 23, 2016
Joshua 24:14-28

In Christ Jesus, who is ever faithful, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

Just about everybody loves a challenge. That is one reason why sports is so popular in our country. It is a challenge to beat the other person or team, to push yourself to the limits, to be the best you can be, to meet and exceed personal goals. Challenges make life interesting and exciting. Very often a tedious job can actually be made to be fun when a challenge is involved---let's see who can rake up the biggest pile of leaves, or put away the most toys in the basement.

Well this morning Joshua lays before us the greatest challenge this life can offer. Whom will you serve? Who will be the God of your heart and life? Who will be first and most important in your life? This morning Joshua challenges every one of us here—man, woman and child---

JOSHUA CHALLENGES US TO SERVE THE LORD!

Last week we heard Moses' farewell speech to the people telling them of the Great Prophet who was to come from them, from their midst. Today we hear of Joshua's farewell address. About 30 years has now passed. Moses was taken up on a mountain, saw the Promised Land and died. God chose Joshua as the next leader and the LORD led the people across the Jordan River by parting it. He gave them one victory after another against the people of Jericho and Ai, and against one nation after another. He performed the miracle of the walls tumbling down and the miracle of the sun standing still so the daylight was extended for the Israelites to win a battle.

In our first Scripture reading Joshua begins his challenge to the people by reviewing all of these deeds of the LORD. The LORD through Joshua is describing His covenant faithfulness. We mentioned all of those I's. The LORD'S actions toward Israel were rooted in pure grace; undeserved love on His part. God took the initiative. He said **I TOOK YOUR FATHER ABRAHAM FROM THE OTHER SIDE OF THE RIVER, AND MULTIPLIED HIS DESCENDANTS AND GAVE HIM ISAAC. TO ISAAC I GAVE JACOB AND ESAU. ALSO I SENT MOSES AND AARON, AND I PLAGUED EGYPT...AFTERWARD I BROUGHT YOU OUT OF EGYPT...AND YOUR EYES SAW WHAT I DID IN EGYPT. AND I BROUGHT YOU INTO THE LAND AND I GAVE THE "ENEMIES" INTO YOUR HAND, I DESTROYED THEM...I DELIVERED YOU...I HAVE GIVEN YOU A LAND FOR WHICH YOU DID NOT LABOR, AND CITIES WHICH YOU DID NOT BUILD, AND YOU DWELL IN THEM; YOU EAT OF THE VINEYARDS AND OLIVE GROVES WHICH YOU DID NOT PLANT.**

God gets all of the credit, Israel none! Israel was given the Promised Land, not because of her faithfulness, her love, goodness and obedience; but solely because of God's faithfulness to His promises, because of God's love and goodness to His people.

Let's jump even more years. Let's jump to today. If God were to speak to us today what do you think He would say? Do you think He would say: **I took you from your slavery in sin...I brought you out of Satan's control... I have forgiven you...I bought you for Myself as My children with My Son's blood...I have destroyed your enemies...I have parted all of your problems like the Red Sea and the Jordan River...I sent you pastors and teachers like Moses, Aaron and Joshua...I called you and brought you here to Peace Thru Christ as members of the CLC...I brought you together as husband and wife...I gave you your children and grandchildren...I have given you your health...I have showered upon you so many blessings that you cannot even count them all... and I will bring you into My Promised Land, a land for which you did not labor and did not build, it is My heavenly home in which you will live with Me forevermore.**

It is all God's doing. God gets all of the credit, we none. We have received all of these physical and spiritual blessings from our God not because we have been so faithful, or because of our own love, goodness and obedience; but because of His faithfulness to His promises and because of His love and goodness toward us, His children through faith in Christ.

The Lord has over and over again in His Word and in His dealings with us pledged Himself in covenant faithfulness! He will never forsake us! He will never fail us!

What greater comfort can we have than to know that despite our many sins and failures we have a

God who is faithful to His promises of grace and mercy, a God who forgives iniquity? What greater comfort is there than to know that in a world of uncertainty and broken promises of men we have the absolute certainty and unbroken promise of our Lord and Savior to rely on? When we fall short of God's glory; when we continually miss the mark of obeying His perfect Law; when we face the trials, temptations and tribulations of this life we can always turn to our Savior with trembling, repentant hearts and receive the Good News of forgiveness, encouragement, comfort and strength. What peace! What joy!

Now the Lord through Joshua changes the pronoun from I to you. We read in vs. 14-15: **NOW THEREFORE, FEAR THE LORD, SERVE HIM IN SINCERITY AND IN TRUTH, AND PUT AWAY THE GODS WHICH YOUR FATHERS SERVED ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE RIVER AND IN EGYPT. SERVE THE LORD! AND IF IT SEEMS EVIL TO YOU TO SERVE THE LORD, CHOOSE FOR YOURSELVES THIS DAY WHOM YOU WILL SERVE, WHETHER THE GODS WHICH YOUR FATHERS SERVED THAT WERE ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE RIVER, OR THE GODS OF THE AMORITES, IN WHOSE LAND YOU DWELL. BUT AS FOR ME AND MY HOUSE, WE WILL SERVE THE LORD.**

5 times the word you or your is used. 7 times the word serve is used. What is Joshua saying here? Is it really OK if the rest of the Israelites chose to serve idols; the gods of their enemies and of their forefathers? Is it right to forsake the LORD Jehovah? Of course not! Joshua is putting the whole matter of their worship before the people. He is stating clearly there is no middle ground. There is no room for lukewarmness or half-hearted worship or dead ritualism. Either you choose to serve one of these idols; these make-believe gods who have done nothing for you; or you today dedicate, devote yourselves to the One True God. The Lord declared it in Deut. 6:13 **FEAR THE LORD YOUR GOD AND SERVE HIM ONLY.**

Joshua's words worked on their hearts and the people are moved to declare: **FAR BE IT FROM US THAT WE SHOULD FORSAKE THE LORD TO SERVE OTHER GODS.** "We will meet your challenge, Joshua. Yes, sir, we will serve the LORD and Him only!"

One would think that Joshua would cry out, "Hallelujah! Praise the Lord" and rejoice! But instead he says something mighty strange---**YOU CANNOT SERVE THE LORD.** One writer calls Joshua's answer "perhaps the most shocking statement in the Old Testament." He appears to reject their bold statement of commitment even though their response was just like his own and exactly what he wanted to hear. Why would he say--**YOU CANNOT SERVE THE LORD?**

Several reasons. One---Talk is cheap! Actions speak louder than words! Joshua is testing the sincerity of the people's response. His aim is to strengthen and cement their commitment.

Two---He may also be questioning their sincerity since many of them earlier had been involved in worshipping idols.

Three---He also is warning them---don't get swept along by emotionalism, by a mass movement of excitement of the moment. Joshua wants the people to count the cost of their commitment.

Loyalty will not be easy. Temptations to compromise will be overwhelming. The holy, righteous God will settle for nothing less than total allegiance. He wants to stress again the grace of God and not the worthiness of the people. Their only hope is not in their pledge of allegiance, in their statement of faith, but in their clinging to God's grace and promises. While He is indeed a just and jealous God, He is also the living and forgiving Lord.

Joshua also wants to break down all ideas that Israel can remain loyal by their own power. Self-confidence is tragic when it comes to spiritual matters. Confidence in God and His Word is critical for remaining faithful **FOR IT IS GOD WHO WORKS IN YOU TO WILL AND TO ACT ACCORDING TO HIS GOOD PURPOSE.** And perhaps Joshua is peering into the future and sees the disastrous choice of future generations. That choice of foreign gods over the Lord will bring about curses, captivity, dispersion and eternal death.

The people listen and then shout again, **NO, BUT WE WILL SERVE THE LORD!**

Joshua declares that there are three witnesses to their pledge of allegiance and commitment: Themselves, the Book of the Law in which Joshua wrote these words and a large rock which Joshua set under an oak tree near the tabernacle of God. We read in vs. 27: **AND JOSHUA SAID TO ALL THE PEOPLE, "BEHOLD, THIS STONE SHALL BE A WITNESS TO US, FOR IT HAS HEARD ALL THE WORDS OF THE LORD WHICH HE SPOKE TO US. IT SHALL THEREFORE BE A WITNESS TO YOU, LEST YOU DENY YOUR GOD."**

The large rock will continue to remind the Israelites of this day and of their covenant. Long after their shouts of allegiance have faded, the large stone will continue to stand as a witness. It will accuse any idolatrous Israelite of being “unfaithful” to the LORD God and breaking his vow. It is as though this large rock has heard and recorded their vows long before the day of audio and video technology. To look at this rock would be the same as replaying a tape of their promises and vows.

We too, every one of us, young or old, male or female need to apply this challenge from our Lord to our lives. We have seen our God’s great love for us. He has chosen us to be His children through baptism. He has cleansed us and set us free from Satan’s domain, redeemed us from sin, death and hell. He has given us confirmed adults His very body and blood through the bread and wine for the blessed assurance of complete forgiveness.

Now it is time for Joshua to ask us: whom will you serve? Does serving the Lord seem undesirable to you; does it seem somehow like a drag, boring, useless, no fun, unprofitable, too much work and effort. Then choose to serve the gods of this world; the gods of pleasure, joys, material things, riches. Then choose them as the ones to whom you will devote your time, talents and energy.

But if your heart has been touched by God’s forgiving love in Christ, by Jesus great sacrifice for your sins; if you have been led to acknowledge your sins and see in Christ full and free forgiveness for all sins; then you will be moved by the Holy Spirit to declare before all the world: **AS FOR ME AND MY HOUSE, WE WILL SERVE THE LORD!**

The Apostle Paul wrote in II Cor. 5:14 **FOR CHRIST'S LOVE COMPELS US, BECAUSE WE ARE CONVINCED THAT ONE DIED FOR ALL, AND THEREFORE ALL DIED. AND HE DIED FOR ALL, THAT THOSE WHO LIVE SHOULD NO LONGER LIVE FOR THEMSELVES BUT FOR HIM WHO DIED FOR THEM AND WAS RAISED AGAIN.**

When we see that God in love chose us, redeemed us through Jesus’ blood, called us to saving faith by the Gospel, forgives us and lavishes on us all the riches of His grace, nothing will be able to keep us from shouting: **Then here will I and mine today A solemn covenant make and say;**

Though all the world forsake Thy Word, I and my house will serve the Lord.

Amen.