

Choices

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Preacher: Nick Louw

[0 : 00] Good morning, everyone. Well, life today is full of choices, isn't it? You know what I mean? Choices everywhere. It seems people have more choices to make on an average day in 2017 than people 100 years ago made in an average year.

You know what I mean? All these choices that we're confronted with every day. What diet to follow, what food to eat, what shop to go to, what insurance to take out, what petrol station to fill up at. What toilet spray to buy, seeing there's, what, 17 different options on the shelf. And it's because we live in this age of choice, this vast amount of choices we face on a daily basis, that you'll find product manufacturers go to great lengths to explain on the back of their products, on the packaging, why we should choose their product over the competition.

It was never that way back in the day when manufacturing first started and there was kind of one soap at the general store to buy. You didn't have a blurb on the back saying how this soap is going to change your life.

It was just soap. You would just go and get it. But now, every soap, every toilet spray, everything has its own little case that it's going to make as to why you should choose it over the competition.

[1 : 13] It doesn't feel right just to go to pick and pay and grab the first one you see on the shelf. No, no. You've got to at least see what the others offer. For example, do I go with Lily of the Valley toilet spray that, according to the description on the back, makes a glamorous, delicately scented statement that will transform my home into a magical glade?

Or do I choose, right next to it, the Lavender Fields toilet spray to imbue my home with peace and rejuvenate my spirit with harmonious song while I sit on the loo?

It's really quite hard to choose in a world full of choices. But it's not just toilet sprays that people struggle to decide which to go with.

The same is true of religion today. Think about it. At last count, there was something like 4,300 different belief systems in our world, all saying different things but all claiming that they're the one to go with over the competition, which makes it difficult for the average person to choose what to believe in a world full of choices.

And then even once you do choose, maybe you've made a choice because of your upbringing or your culture or your family, how do you know you've actually made the right choice? It's a good question to ask.

[2 : 31] Well, back in the days of the Israelites, which we read about in the book of Joshua, it wasn't a whole lot different from how it is today. I mean, sure, they didn't have 17 different types of toilet spray to choose from, but they did have a whole lot of choice when it came to religion, when it came to what gods to serve in that day.

Now, of course, the assumption, as we've read through Joshua, the assumption is that the Israelites would choose the God of Israel. That makes sense. The God that they knew as Yahweh, the God who had proven himself to be true and powerful, the God who had done all this incredible stuff that we've been reading about in the last 23 chapters, right in front of their eyes, you'd think it's the obvious choice.

You'd think that's a no-brainer. They would choose to serve that God. But then we come to Joshua 24, and we see what Joshua says, and it turns out that even after all that's happened, they're still weighing up their options when it comes to gods and religion.

They're still looking at the nations around them. They're still looking at the religions around them and going, you know, Yahweh's great. You know, Jericho was awesome, but maybe those are worth a try as well.

They're fickle hearts. They were still looking around. They were still looking at their options. And so Joshua takes this last opportunity, and it's the very last opportunity because at the end of this chapter, he's dead.

[3 : 55] He takes this last opportunity to challenge them to make their choice now, not to carry on looking at the options and playing the field of gods, but to make their choice.

He confronts them here in this passage to make their choice of who they're going to serve for the rest of their lives. We see it in verse 15. This is a central verse in this chapter. And, you know, he says, essentially, after all you've seen, after all that God has done in the history of your people and in Canaan, you've experienced his work, but now is the time to make your choice.

Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve. That is the key verse that I want us to consider this morning, the key challenge that Joshua gives out to these people.

And what's interesting is that he doesn't just assume they'll serve God. Joshua's been around the block a few times. He knows people. And he knows not only that they won't necessarily serve God despite all they've seen, but he also knows that he can't force them to do anything.

He doesn't force them to do anything. All he can do, all Joshua can do at this really like last gasp attempt is tell them what God has done, remind them of what God has done.

[5 : 16] But at the end of the day, what they choose to do about it is still totally up to them. Let me tell you, as a pastor, this rings so true for me today in church.

Because I can do this every Sunday. I can preach my lungs out every Sunday. I can preach until I'm blue in the face, but whether you actually choose to do anything about it, it's totally up to you. I can't force you to do anything about what I'm preaching. The best I can do, and the best I can do for you this morning, as we finish this journey through Joshua, is to do what Joshua did for the people here.

And that is to give you some reasons from this passage why you too need to choose who you're going to serve in life as you leave this place. I can't force you to do it, but I can sure tell you why. And that's what Joshua does. And there's really four reasons that I want to look at this morning as to why we should choose to serve the Lord wholeheartedly.

[6 : 23] And the first reason, it's quite an obvious one, quite a simple one, is that everybody serves something. You see, now, one of the reasons that people often hesitate to commit their lives to serving God, I've seen it time and time again, is because they don't want to let go of their freedom.

They're enjoying their life. They're enjoying calling the shots. They like their independence. Maybe that's you here this morning. Maybe you've been kind of toying with church and listening to sermons, and you're listening here to the sermon, and you're happy to come and listen, but you're still not quite prepared to take that step and give your life to God and give Him control of your life. You still secretly, deep down inside, want to call the shots. You still want to be the boss of your life. And I can understand that. But let me burst your bubble right away.

You're not the boss of your life. Sin is. The Bible is very clear on that. It says, From the moment we're born, we're already slaves to sin. That's the reason the world is like it is.

That's the reason we're like we are. We are not the boss of our lives. We're not as in control as we think. And I can prove it to you by asking you to try to keep the Ten Commandments for one week. The Ten Commandments, those commandments written up on the wall there, which is really a summary of God's will for people and how to live.

[7 : 46] And God gave us, by the way, God gave us those Ten Commandments, not as some checklist to get into heaven, but He gave His law as a way of showing us that we're really not in control of our lives like we think we are.

That's the reason God gave us His law, as a mirror to show us the reality of ourselves. I mean, try it for a week. Try to love your Creator with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, which He deserves, of course, because He gave you everything you have.

But can you do it? Try to honor your parents perfectly. Try not to covet, to never want what other people have. Try and never lie.

Try and never think lustful thoughts, which Jesus said is adultery of the heart. Can you do it? Ah, but come on, Pastor. That's impossible. Don't be unrealistic.

We're just human. Yes, I know. But have you ever thought why it's impossible for us to carry out these quite simple instructions from God?

[8 : 45] I mean, it's not like He's asking us to design a space shuttle. Okay, these are fairly simple instructions. Just don't lie. Don't covet. Love God. Love your neighbor. What's so complicated about that?

Simple instructions that if everyone followed would be heaven on earth, and yet we just can't do them. We know if everybody in the world obeyed those Ten Commandments, this would be amazing. This would be an amazing world to live.

And yet we can't do it. Why? Because we're not as free as we think we are. We're not free to do what we want. We are slaves to sin.

The Bible is quite clear on that. You see, we already serve something without even knowing it. And not just sin.

The Bible says we serve idols too. Now you're thinking, that's ridiculous. I don't have any little statues in my living room that I bow down to. Oh, well, idols aren't just physical little statues.

[9 : 44] An idol is anything that you look to to give you what you want and to which you make sacrifices of time and energy. What you chase after in life or security or fulfillment or happiness or gratification becomes our idols.

The things that we focus on more than anything else. And we sacrifice for more than anything else. Whether that be sport or money or career or a particular human relationship.

These are things that become our gods that we serve. Our modern day idols. But you see, the point is, what I'm trying to make is, whether it's sin or idols, we're all already serving something.

And if it's not God, it's something else or someone else. And that's why Joshua says here in verse 15, But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve.

Whether the gods of your ancestors beyond the Euphrates or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living. You see the option that he gives the people there? He says, choose who you will serve.

[10 : 56] Not whether you will serve something or someone, but who it's going to be. Because you're going to serve something. You don't have a choice in that. And it's exactly the same for us today as it was for the people back then.

All you can choose in your life is who or what you're going to serve. And that's the first reason you need to choose deliberately, consciously, to serve God this morning.

Because if you don't choose to serve God this morning, as you leave this place later, you've already chosen to serve something else. If you don't choose to serve God this week, you've already chosen to serve something else without even knowing it.

You've already chosen to chase after and pour your energy and time into something or someone else. Okay, so what's so bad about that? You might ask. Maybe you like serving these other things that you chase after, these idols of life.

If you're honest with yourself, don't call them idols, Pastor. That makes them sound bad. I quite enjoy my career and my money and my sport and my entertainment. They make me happy.

[12 : 01] Why give up these things to serve God? Well, and that brings us to the second reason why I want you to seriously reconsider who you serve. Because while serving idols like sport or money or career might make you happy for a time, one thing they can't do is save you.

Only God can do that. Look at what Joshua says in verse 20 in explaining to the Israelites why they should serve God. It's very interesting. Verse 20, he says, If 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. That's a sales pitch if you've ever heard one. Imagine reading on the back of a toilet spray. If you forsake this product and choose another, disaster will befall your toilet and you will be utterly destroyed. That's just scare tactics.

Illegitimate scare tactics. Sadly, products that are trying to sell themselves often use scare tactics to get you to buy them. I don't know if you remember when computers first came out.

You know those old green and black screens? That's all there were. I remember when our family first got a computer, there was this scare going around that these screens and the radiation was going to give you eye cancer.

[13 : 19] And so you needed to buy these special filters that you kind of clip on the front of the screens. Do you remember those? Remember those special filters? And if you don't have the filters, then your brain's going to melt and stuff.

Of course, there was no such thing as melting brains. But people didn't know it was a new technology. And so they sold these filters by the million just using a scare tactic. And products often do that. They use illegitimate scare tactics. And you see it all the time. Health foods often. I mean, I'm not saying anything bad about health foods. Organic is great and health foods are good. But often they step over the line and they kind of say, you know, if you don't eat our tomatoes, which were grown in the pure airs of the Himalayas by Buddhist monks, then you'll get cancer.

You know, it's scare tactics. We see it all over the place. But in this case, Joshua is not using a scare tactic. He's not trying to make the people illegitimately fear. He's just telling them the truth. And it's hard to tell the truth. But it's the truth. When he talks about God destroying them, he's not using a scare tactic. He's just helping them to see reality.

[14:29] And it makes sense. You see, if we are slaves to sin like the Bible says we are, if we can't help but disobey God's laws, then there's really no reason for God to keep us around.

They're His laws. They're His instructions. If we go against them, if we can't obey them, why are we even here? The Bible says the wages of sin is death.

And God has every right to destroy sinners utterly and totally. The only reason we're still around is because God wants to give us a chance to come back to Him before it's too late. And so this is not some vain threat.

It's not a scare tactic. It's a loving warning of the reality we face so that we can take on board the truth and we can respond rightly to it. And it's important to respond to a warning when we hear it. I don't know if you've ever heard the story of Harry Randall Truman. This guy, picture behind me. Harry Truman was a...

[15:33] And don't get it confused for the American president. He wasn't the American president. He was just an elderly man who lived in a cottage by himself in the mountains with 16 cats.

And it was just him and his cats. And it was an isolated house at the foot of Mount St. Helens in the American state of Washington. Now, Mount St. Helens was an active volcano.

And in early 1980, authorities came to Mr. Truman's house and they warned the residents of the area that geologists had found volcanic activity and they needed to evacuate because eruption of this volcano was imminent.

And they started to evacuate the area. They came around to Mr. Truman's house with the warning and offered to help him pack and transport him and his 16 cats. And you know what he said?

No, no thanks. I'm fine. And he closed the door on them. Because, you know, Harry Truman was an independent man. No one was the boss of him.

[16:32] No one could tell him what to do. He lived there his whole life. He never had to evacuate. He's not going to listen to these young, fear-mongering whippersnappers now.

No, if worst came to the worst, he would make his own plans. Thank you very much. And so he didn't take their warning seriously. And sadly, on the 18th of May, 1981, or 80, 1980, this volcano erupted in a huge explosion and Mr. Truman and all his cats perished in the volcano.

Sad story. But so many people today are in the same position. Not living near a volcano, but living under the wrath of God, which is far worse. The Bible warns that God has said today he will judge sin once and for all, and it's on his calendar, and it is coming.

But people fail to take that warning seriously so often. They think they can just make their own plans. If worst comes to the worst, I'll have a conversation with God. I'll make my own plans.

They don't realize the danger that they're in. They're happy where they're at, living like they're living. And sadly, because they're not aware of the danger, they're also not aware of the amazing rescue that God has offered them out of that danger.

[17:48] You see, you only take a rescue if you believe that the danger exists. And those people who came around to Mr. Truman's house, they had the trucks, they had a way out of the mountain.

They offered it to him, but he refused it because he didn't realize the danger he was in. It's important to notice in this passage here, Joshua 24, that when Joshua gave this challenge in verse 15 to choose God, he began, he didn't just start with that.

Notice how he started his sermon here. He began by first reminding the people of God's rescue.

The first 13 verses is a recap of the history of God's people.

How God had miraculously rescued his people out of Egyptian slavery and set them apart for him. How he had protected them in the wilderness and brought them into the promised land by no merit

of their own.

To vineyards that they didn't plant. And just a total gift. How God had saved them from a terrible life of oppression and slavery and brought them into their own land. Now, of course, as Christians reading the Bible, we know that God's rescue of the Israelites was just always meant to be a foreshadow of God rescuing people in every age out of the slavery of sin and giving us eternal life in heaven forever.

[19 : 12] And how did he do that? How did he rescue us from sin? I hope you know if you've been here for any length of time. He sent his son Jesus into the world.

The only perfect human being who has ever been able to obey God's law perfectly. And then he came to die the punishment for the sins that we've committed.

To take our sin on him and give us his righteousness. So that we can have a promised land that we don't deserve. And that's what the Bible is really all about.

That's what Joshua and all the Old Testament and all the New Testament is all about. If you had to sum it up, the Bible is all about God's great plan to save people from their sins. And it's been set in motion right from Genesis 1.

Right from the very beginning. That is what the Bible is about. It's not just some random collection of historical documents that have some moral lessons for us. No, the Bible is a huge, grand plan of salvation that spans thousands of years.

[20 : 18] It's more. It spans eternity. To tell us what God has done to rescue us out of slavery to sin. And to tell us how Jesus is uniquely qualified to rescue us from the danger that we're in.

And to tell us that he alone died a substitutionary death for sinners. And that should make choosing to serve the God of the Bible over idols a little bit easier.

Because idols can't save you. Jesus can. Jesus is uniquely qualified to. Idols might make you happy and comfortable for a time in this life.

But they can't save you. Only the God of the Bible can save you from the danger that you're in. And that's the second reason that you should seriously reconsider who you serve.

Thirdly, life is uncertain. Notice Joshua says, choose today whom you shall serve.

[21 : 22] Not choose next week. You know, Joshua doesn't say go away and reconsider this and get back to me in a few months time. He doesn't say enjoy your vineyards.

Live your life. Now then one day when you're old on your bed, maybe consider serving God. No. He says, there's no more time to wait. You need to choose today.

If for no other reason, then you don't know if you'll be around tomorrow. Maybe it'll be too late to choose then. Because life is uncertain, isn't it?

It's a reality we face. I have this little gospel tract in my office. I've got a number of little gospel tracts. Little pamphlets and leaflets that explain the gospel to people. But what I love about this one, it's a card.

And on the front of it, it asks you to fill out the date of your death. By day, month, and year. And then on the back, it reminds you to make sure that you get right with God before that date.

[22 : 18] Now, the point, of course, is that no one knows the date of their death. And so today is the day you've got to get right with God. Today is the day you've got to choose.

The day that you actually hear God calling you through His Word and by His Spirit to Himself. The day that that clicks in your mind that you realize what Jesus has done to save you from your sins. That's the day you need to turn from your idols and choose to serve God. Don't delay. At the end of this talk today, this morning, I want to give you an opportunity to do that.

I want to give you an opportunity after the sermon to do just that. To decide, to choose, to serve God. And I encourage you to take that opportunity. But before that, I want to tell you one final reason you need to choose to serve God today.

And that is that serving God does not come naturally. Serving God doesn't come naturally. If it did, there'd be no problem, wouldn't there? I wouldn't need to tell you to choose to serve God.

[23 : 27] Because you would do it anywhere. You wouldn't have to make a deliberate choice to do it. Day after day, week after week. But it doesn't come naturally. And that's the truth.

And Joshua makes the point to the people here very bluntly in verse 19. I wonder if you noticed what he said. The people, okay, so I'll back up a bit. The people hear the challenge of Joshua to choose to serve God.

He's given them this whole outline of God's rescue and what they must do. And now, today, choose to serve God. And they respond in verse 16 and they say this. Far be it from us to forsake the Lord and serve other gods.

It 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.

And 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. And you know what Joshua says next? No, you won't.

[24 : 28] You can't. Verse 19. You are not able to serve the Lord. I don't think Joshua would have made a very good motivational speaker, just personally.

You know, those guys are paid to tell you what you can do, what you have the potential to do in your life, and how you can do whatever you set your mind to. Well, Joshua is a demotivational speaker. He tells them the opposite.

He tells the people that they can't do what they've just chosen to do. It's literally not within their power to serve God. Thanks, Joshua.

Great encouragement. But then why tell them to choose in the first place if they can't do it, apparently? Well, because while it's not within their power, it is within God's power.

You see, God not only makes a way to save people from their sins, but He gives them power to turn from that sin and to serve Him. And the Bible is very realistic about this.

[25 : 33] And that, I understand, is what Joshua is trying to say to these people. He's using a shock tactic to help them to see that it's not as easy as they think to serve God. They can't do it by themselves.

Time and again in the Bible, the Bible tells us that we are helpless slaves to sin, like I said earlier. But God offers us power to overcome that slavery through the gospel, through Jesus, through His Holy Spirit.

Like He did with the Israelites in Egypt with their literal slavery, God's power works in the world today to help us overcome our spiritual slavery.

And yet we'll only rely on that power and not on ourselves if we realize how much we need it. You know, we understand that, as I say, if we've been coming to church for any length of time, we understand that salvation, we can't save ourselves.

We need Jesus to save us, and we trust in Him. We call to trust in Him, to put our faith in Him to save us. But then we think we can go out and live for Him in our own strength.

[26 : 46] But it's exactly the same. You see, holiness and sanctification and living for God takes as much reliance and trust in Him as our initial salvation did.

And we must realize that. We need to rely on God's power, and we'll only do that once we realize how much we need it. Only then will you devote yourself to God and pray to Him and rely on Him minute to minute and day to day.

Only then will you cling to Him, and will He be front and center in your life. The moment you think serving God is easy is the moment you stop doing it. And so choose to serve God today and tomorrow and the next day.

Don't think it'll just happen because you call yourself a Christian and you've been to church. Each day you need to make the deliberate choice to serve God afresh this day and to rely on God's help to do it.

Because if you don't, you will always slip back to your idols. And that is Joshua's closing challenge to the people back then and to us today. That is God's challenge to us today through His Word.

[28 : 01] Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve. So will you choose to serve God today? You must serve something. As you go out of this place, as you go into a new week, you will serve something.

Who will it be? What will it be? And so if you've heard God's voice this morning, why not choose today, before it's too late, to serve the God who alone can save you from your sins and bring you into eternal life.

And if you have done that, if you've already in your life made that decision, crossed that line, chosen to give yourself, body and soul, to God, to serve Him, then I want you, as I close, to take note of how Joshua ends.

He sets up a stone. There's so many stones of memorial in the book of Joshua. But here, Joshua sets up a stone to remind the people of the choice that they made to serve God that day. So as they go about their daily life and years to come, and they face all the choices and the decisions and the roads of life, they will look to this memorial stone and they will not forget the central choice that they made that day to serve God.

So will you remember that choice? As you go about your life, as you make your plans and your decisions, never forget who it is that you've chosen to serve.

[29 : 29] And if you've never done that, then I want to give you an opportunity right now, like I said I would, to choose consciously to serve God as you leave this place.

And so I'm going to pray a prayer. And if you want to do that, pray after me in your heart silently. I'll pray it line by line. Let's not waste any more time.

Let's choose today who we're going to serve. Let's bow our heads. And you can pray this in your heart after me. Creator God, Heavenly Father, I confess to you that I am a slave to sin.

I know I deserve your judgment. But I know that you sent Jesus to take that judgment for me.

I trust in his blood to wash away my sins. And I choose today to serve you for the rest of my life.

[30 : 36] Help me to serve you with all my heart. And lead me into life everlasting. Amen.