

As I mentioned last Sunday, we are going to spend the summer looking at Christian relationships. And for the first few weeks of this we are going to focus on our relationship with God. How does it work? How do we approach God in relationship? What should that relationship look like? In our scripture readings this morning, both the one we just read (Deuteronomy 7:7-9) and this one I am about to read, we read about God’s relationship with humanity and what it has been like since the beginning. And in this passage from Joshua, Joshua gives a speech reminding Israel of what their relationship with God has been like and should be like. If you remember, Moses did not get to enter the promised land. That ended up being the job of Joshua. So, Israel has entered the promised land and God has protected them from the nations there and as Israel gets settled, Joshua preaches. And this is where we pick up in chapter 24. Now this is a long passage, but it is long for a reason, so bear with me.

Joshua 24:1-15

Then Joshua assembled all the tribes of Israel at Shechem. He summoned the elders, leaders, judges and officials of Israel, and they presented themselves before God. <sup>2</sup> Joshua said to all the people, “This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: ‘Long ago your ancestors, including Terah the father of Abraham and Nahor, lived beyond the Euphrates River and worshiped other gods.’ <sup>3</sup> But I took your father Abraham from the land beyond the Euphrates and led him throughout Canaan and gave him many descendants. I gave him Isaac, <sup>4</sup> and to Isaac I gave Jacob and Esau. I assigned the hill country of Seir to Esau, but Jacob and his family went down to Egypt. <sup>5</sup> “Then I sent Moses and Aaron, and I afflicted the Egyptians by what I did there, and I brought you out. <sup>6</sup> When I brought your people out of Egypt, you came to the sea, and the Egyptians pursued them with chariots and horsemen as far as the Red Sea. <sup>7</sup> But they cried to the LORD for help, and he put darkness between you and the Egyptians; he brought the sea over them and covered them. You saw with your own eyes what I did to the Egyptians. Then you lived in the wilderness for a long time. <sup>8</sup> “I brought you to the land of the Amorites who lived east of the Jordan. They fought against you, but I gave them into your hands. I destroyed them from before you, and you took possession of their land.’ <sup>9</sup> When Balak son of Zippor, the king of Moab, prepared to fight against Israel, he sent for Balaam son of Beor to put a curse on you. <sup>10</sup> But I would not listen to Balaam, so he blessed you again and again, and I delivered you out of his hand. <sup>11</sup> “Then you crossed the Jordan and came to Jericho. The citizens of Jericho fought against you, as did also the Amorites, Perizzites, Canaanites, Hittites, Girgashites, Hivites and Jebusites, but I gave them into your hands. <sup>12</sup> I sent the hornet ahead of you, which drove them out before you—also the two Amorite kings. You did not do it with your own sword and bow. <sup>13</sup> So I gave you a land on which you did not toil and cities you did not build; and you live in them and eat from vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant.’ <sup>14</sup> “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. <sup>15</sup> But 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.” This is God’s Word for us this morning.

Before I read this passage I said that both these scripture readings this morning teach us something about our relationship with God. The first reading, from Deuteronomy 7 clearly states that God *chose* Israel and God did this out of love. Verse 7 says God did not choose them because of their numbers and then verse 8 says but it was because the Lord loved you. The starting point for our relationship with God is God’s choosing. Our knowing God is initiated by God. It is not us choosing to have a relationship with God first. God acts first and then we have the opportunity to respond or not. The idea that God chooses us is a beautiful one. In fact, Paul

often uses adoption language to talk about this. In Romans 8 he says this “<sup>14</sup>For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God.<sup>15</sup> The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship.” In an adoption parents go and seek out a child. They choose to be parents. And in our relationship with God, God has chosen to love us. Chosen to make us God’s children. And Paul says we are adopted into sonship. In the culture of Paul’s time that means you are adopted to a position where you are an heir in the family. Only sons could be heirs back then. So, Paul’s choice of the word sonship is important in that verse.

I think I have told some of you this before. I happen to be adopted. I was adopted before I was one year old. And my adopted family is my family. I have never looked for another family. And my family has been largely wonderful. But there was a time when a few members of my father’s family asked my grandparents to not include me in their will because I was not “really” a member of the family. And my loving grandparents did not take that advice. My grandparents considered me their grandchild as much as their other grandchildren and they treated all of us the same both during their lives as well as in their will. I was fully adopted and fully an heir. And that is what God does with us and did beginning with Abraham.

So we are chosen by God. Now, this idea of being chosen by God bothers some people. Rather than respond with thankfulness to God for God reaching out to them, they start to question if there are people who are not chosen by God and whether or not that is fair. I know we all care about fairness for good reasons, but here we have no place in deciding what is fair. Because again, God is the one that initiates all of this and we don’t earn any of it. What would be fair based on human behavior and our human history with God is that none of us would be chosen. So the fact that God chooses us is not up for a fairness debate.

However, I do not think we need to be concerned about the fairness issue. Deuteronomy 7 clearly states that God chooses out of love. Verses 7 and 8 “<sup>7</sup>The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. <sup>8</sup>But it was because the LORD loved you.” God chooses out of love. Verse 9 says God keeps a covenant of love. A covenant is a promise. God is keeping a promise to love. Is a God keeping a promise of love going to choose us unfairly? I don’t think so.

Honestly, I think if we look at the facts here we have nothing to worry about. God came incarnate in the person of Jesus Christ and sacrificed his life for us. That is a God of love. And then Jesus promised that anyone that believed in him would be saved and in the presence of God. This indicates to me that God has chosen humanity. God has opened the door to all who will come to God. John 3:16 says “whoever believes in him.” God has chosen to make a way for us to be with God. Now the response part comes after this. And our choosing to live in the way that God plans for us, or not, is a topic that Rev. Kalvesmaki will preach on next Sunday. But God definitely chooses us first. That is where our relationship with God begins.

Then there is this passage here in Joshua where Joshua recounts for Israel, as a message from God, the history of what God has done for them. He goes all the way back to Abraham and recounts how God has been there for them and rescued them and paved the way for them, generation after generation. God has preserved them. And that is the other aspect of our relationship with God I want to note this morning. We already covered that we are chosen by God. Now we are also preserved by God. What does it mean that we are preserved by God? It obviously does not mean that our lives in this world are preserved. All of the generations that Joshua includes in the passage are gone. So it is not a superficial or physical preservation. It is a preservation of God’s people over generations. It is the bigger picture that we cannot fully see. God preserves God’s message of love and salvation through generation after generation after generation. And we are just one

of those generations. And some of what God will do through us will be for the purpose of the generation after us coming to know God. God preserves us.

I think it is worth noting that at no point does God look at the evil and disobedience of humanity and say “OK, I’m done. They just won’t listen. I am walking away.” God never gets to that point. Even with the flood he preserves Noah and his family which sets the stage for a renewed relationship with God. God preserves us over and over again, even when we fail. Because again, God is a God of love. Love on a level we cannot even fathom. Despite our disobedience and rejection God preserves humanity over and over again. And that is what Joshua has laid out in this passage. God keeps at it through Abraham, then Isaac, then Esau and Jacob, then Moses and Aaron, then protection from the King of Moab, then saved at Jericho, then protected from all the peoples of Canaan, God keeps paving the way for them generation after generation. I know this was a long passage to read this morning but I wanted you to feel the length of it. I wanted you to experience how long God’s preservation goes. And although we are looking at this preservation from the Old Testament roots, we know God continues to preserve in the New Testament with the coming and the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. God makes a way and then Jesus institutes the church. And that is us. That’s our part. The preservation of God’s people continues with us. That is the job of our generation. That is the task before us.

Now, as we look at this passage from Joshua there is one very clear thing that Joshua is asking them to do. Starting in verse 14 Joshua says this. And this is the part where Joshua is actually speaking for himself. This whole passage up to this point is God’s words shared through Joshua to his people. But starting here, Joshua is now speaking his own mind. And he says this: <sup>14</sup>“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. <sup>15</sup> But 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.”

Joshua asks them to make a choice. And as I said, Pastor Ken will talk more about this next week. But Joshua asks them to choose who they are going to worship and who they are going to serve. Are you going to serve the Lord which has chosen and preserved you for all this time, or are you going to serve other gods? The gods of the people around you here in Canaan. And I think we can take that question seriously. Who are we as a church going to serve? Are we going to serve the God that has brought us this far? Or are we going to let the gods of the culture around us influence us and sway us? We have a choice. God has already chosen us, but are we going to serve that God or others?

What are we fixing our eyes on in this church? It is God always? Or do politics threaten to be our god? Or does money threaten to be our god? Or does human power threaten to become our god? Does prestige look like a nice god? There are all sorts of gods we can serve. The world around us has no shortage of them. And as we go into a transition as a church we really have to choose what god we are going to follow. Pastor Mike has been gone for two weeks and I have already seen other gods coming into play. We need to be careful to fix our eyes and our goals on God and God alone. And the way to do that is exactly what Joshua has done here. Stick to what we know about God from what God has already done. In our case that means stick to God’s Word and what it tells us about God and us. It tells us that God has kept God’s covenant of love even when we have not. It tells us that God has chosen us. Our relationship with God began with God and not with anything we came up with. It tells us that God made a way through Jesus Christ. It tells us that God has a plan for his church. And even though God probably does not have a gender the way we think about gender, God does refer to the church as his bride. Think about marriage with God. God has made an eternal commitment to us. Is that the God we are going to follow or not?

I love how Joshua words verse 15. He says “<sup>15</sup> But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve.” After this long, long passage about everything that God has done for them, he gives them this ridiculous option of serving this God being undesirable. He basically is saying if you want to follow a god other than the one that has chosen you and loved you and saved you over and over again. If THAT is not desirable to you, then go serve someone else. It seems silly doesn't it? Of course they are going to choose God. But what do we know from the rest of the Bible? Israel fails. They do follow other gods later on. Israel fails and people fail all the time. We may want to follow God, but we fail sometimes.

I think it is the intention of everyone here to follow that God. The one true God. I think we all want that. I do not suspect that any of us wants any of those other gods I mentioned earlier to lead this church or become the focus of this church. I think we all want to be God's church and follow God's plan for us. However, Satan does not want us to follow God. Satan wants to disrupt that relationship. And especially in a time of transition, Satan will look for ways to mess us up. How many of you have read my chimes article in the current June/July chimes? For those of you who have read it, did you find it helpful? I wrote a short summary of a book titled *The Devil goes to Church*. And in that article I summarize the ways in which Satan likes to disrupt people in churches. And these are some of the ways we can go astray and start to follow the other gods that I mentioned earlier. Satan's four favorite tactics are doubt, deception, discouragement, and division. Let me list those again: doubt, deception, discouragement, and division. Any of those sound familiar? Ever been tempted by any of those? I have. And I can guarantee, not just suppose, I *guarantee* that Satan will try these tactics on us. So, we need to be alert and aware and recognize these things when they show up. Because these are the ways in which we can lose sight on following the one true God.

Brothers and sisters, let's choose to serve the God that Joshua has talked about. The God that chose us first. The God that chose us out of love. The God that has preserved God's people, including us, from the beginning for generation after generation. And let's remember that it really is a choice. It has to be intentional. We will have to work at it together. But I assure you that God is the right choice. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, amen.