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As For Me and My House Joshua 24:1-18

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I have seen it on throw pillows, framed pictures on the wall, even bumper stickers on cars: “*As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.*” It is a right and faithful declaration of commitment and intent. But, as with all such one-line declarations of faith, what is missing is the fuller context of that commitment and intent. Specifically, what has led up to that declaration of commitment and intent – what is the backstory which has brought about what is, after all, a rather strong counter-cultural stance. After all, it make life a whole lot easier to say, “As for me and my house, we will do what everyone else is doing.”

Missing also is what exactly that declaration of commitment and intent entails, will look like, in the living out of our lives from that declaration forward. To truly understand the meaning of that declaration of commitment and intent, “*As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord*” – both within its original Biblical context, as well as for our own lives – we need to explore what goes before it, as well as what is meant to come after it.

So we begin with Joshua, the one who first made this declaration regarding himself and his house. Joshua had been chosen by God as the successor to Moses. Moses had led the people of God out of their slavery in Egypt, had led them through the forty years of their wilderness wandering. But it was Joshua who had led the people of God out of the wilderness and into possession of the Promised Land. And, as our passage begins, all of this has now been accomplished – Israel is in the Promised Land and it is theirs. Each tribe has been assigned that portion of the land in which they are to dwell. But before they go to their separate dwellings, Joshua calls them all together one last time – to issue to them what amounts to his farewell address.

And he begins his address to all of Israel by reminding them of all that has happened, of all the good that has come to them solely from God’s almighty and loving hand: “*And Joshua said to all the people, ‘Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel . . .’*” And then he tells the whole story of Israel’s history. How God had chosen Abraham to be the bearer of His covenant of salvation – a covenant promise then passed down to Isaac and to Jacob. And then, when their descendants, the people of Israel, were enslaved in Egypt, God had sent Moses and the ten plagues to convince Pharaoh to let His people go:

Then I brought your fathers out of Egypt, and you came to the sea. And the Egyptians pursued your fathers with chariots and horsemen to the Red Sea. And when they cried to the Lord, he put

darkness between you the Egyptians and made the sea come upon them and cover them . . .

He then describes how God had led them through the wilderness and now into the Promised Land. How God had fought and won their battles for them – so that now they would dwell in a land on which they had not labored and in cities that they did not build. *“You eat the fruit of vineyards and olive orchards that you did not plant,”* God tells them through his servant.

And then comes the single most important word in all of Joshua’s speech, in all of God’s Word that he spoke to Israel that day: *“Therefore.”* *“Now therefore fear the Lord and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness.”* “Therefore” – meaning the backstory to Joshua’s declaration of commitment and intent – the reason underlying that declaration and explaining why Israel rightfully should make such a counter-cultural declaration of their own. Therefore – because of everything God has done for us – therefore. Therefore – and here Joshua invites all of Israel to join with him – therefore, *“As for me and my father’s house, we will serve the Lord.”* Therefore, which is just another way of saying what St. John says in one of his letters, that *“We love God because God has first loved us.”*¹ Because of all that God has done in saving His people Israel from their slavery in Egypt, preserving and guiding them through the wilderness, and now leading them into and giving them the Promised Land – therefore, *“Fear the Lord and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness.”* Therefore, *“As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”*

But if that is the backstory to Joshua’s declaration, and Israel’s commitment and intent to do the same – then what does that declaration of commitment and intent to God actually mean for Joshua’s life, Israel’s life, going forward? Says the Lord through Joshua: *“Put away the gods that your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord . . . Choose this day whom you will serve.”* The declaration of commitment and intent to serve the Lord from this day forward, in other words, is an exclusive one. Him only shall you serve, says Joshua. Meaning that Israel is not to live like the other nations around them, but Israel is to live for God alone. No longer conformed to the world around them, but now transformed by the grace of God and in accord with the Ten Commandments. From now on, because of this declaration of commitment and intent, Israel will live as a people set apart, different, even strange in the eyes of others – as they live by the Word and ways of the One whom alone they are to worship and obey. *“As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”* Not Baal, not Isis or Osiris, not Mammon – but the Lord God, the Savior of Israel. If the backstory of Joshua and Israel’s declaration of commitment and intent to the Lord is all that He has done to save them, what that declaration of commitment and intent means going forward is that Israel shall live in faithful response to the grace of God, still leading them forward day by day. *“We love God because God has first loved us.”*

So, what then about us? What about our own declaration of commitment and intent to the Lord – assuming that we have indeed made one. What does it mean for us to say with Joshua and Israel, *“As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord?”* Well, first of all, we must ask what is the backstory to our declaration? Our backstory begins, of course, with what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. If the great salvation story of the Old Testament is God’s deliverance of Israel from their slavery in Egypt, the great salvation story of the New Testament is God’s deliverance of all His people, in every nation, from our slavery to sin and to death. Our backstory begins in a manger in Bethlehem, it reaches its culmination upon a cross and then an empty tomb outside of

Jerusalem. And it is anchored in God's promise that He will one day come again to bring His Kingdom on earth. That is the backstory of our faith.

Let me say that another way. Every year I meet with our youth for a question-and-answer session – which I just love. Because our youth ask the best questions, the most honest questions, the genuinely deep and important questions. And one question that I get asked almost every year has to do with their personal salvation – specifically how they are to respond to their (usually Baptist) friends who want to know when and where they were saved. I tell our youth to answer them that their salvation took place two thousand years ago on a cross and in an empty tomb outside Jerusalem. It sounds like I am being flippant – but I am not. For that truly is the story of our personal salvation – as well as the backstory which undergirds our own personal declaration of commitment and intent that we will serve the Lord. Because God has so loved the world, as St. John puts it – we commit ourselves to Him. We love God because He has first love us. We commit ourselves in faith and service to God because He has first committed Himself to us in love and grace through Jesus Christ. What God has done for us in Jesus Christ – that is the backstory to our own declarations of commitment and intent to God.

But there is also, and always, a more personal backstory to our declaration of commitment and intent to God. The great story – the one which matters most – is, again, the story of what God has done for us all in Jesus. But also important, if less so, is how what God did for us all in Jesus has become real to us individually – how it has come to enter into our heads and hearts and become our story of salvation, how it has brought us round to making our own personal declaration of ourselves as His. So, what is the personal backstory to our faith? In what moments did we experience as God's grace as breaking through to us individually? What persons did God place in our lives, whose faith awakened and inspired our own? In what hour of need did we find Him close at hand, an ever-present help in time of trouble? And in what occasions of great joy did we see clearly the evidence of His providential goodness and blessing upon us? What's our story? What's your story?

I have always loved this particular testimony, this backstory to her own declaration of faith, which comes from one of my seminary professors, Dr. Elizabeth Achtemeier – a brilliant Biblical scholar. I love this testimony to her our backstory of faith because it has helped me think about and define my own. She writes:

I do not know when I first became conscious of that presence and working of God in my life. I can look back over the years and recall times when I was not granted an opportunity or a position, only to realize later that God had chosen the wiser course for my life. I can remember occasions when I mysteriously sensed that the words I was teaching or preaching were not my words but were being given to me by an Other outside of me. Certainly I can only confess that my marriage was planned by God from the foundation of the earth. Why else did Bud and I suddenly start eagerly seeking one another, when we had been just passing acquaintances for two years before?

God has been at work in my life. I know that beyond all doubt. He has guided its direction, corrected its wayward choices, protected its course, so that I have had to conclude that the promise to Jacob is also partially mine – that God will not leave me until he has done that which he purposes for me.²

What is your story of coming to faith? “*Now, therefore . . .*” What is the therefore which undergirds our own declaration of commitment and intent to follow Jesus – the backstory to our own affirmation that, “*As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord*”? We need to know that story, be able to tell that story, cling to that story.

But also, of course, let us ask what that declaration of commitment and intent has meant for how we have lived our lives each day going forward from that commitment we have made? And how will that declaration of commitment and intent to serve and fear the Lord alone continue to shape and guide and uphold our daily living going forward from this day? What does it mean for us, right now, to say with Joshua, “*As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord*”? And, perhaps even more importantly, what ought it to mean?

Well, the answer to that question is a sermon unto itself. Actually, a lifetime’s worth of sermons. But let me offer two thoughts just for this morning on what it means going forward as those having pledged to serve our Lord in sincerity and in faithfulness. First, it means that we should not think of ourselves as the end-users of God’s grace, but as the conduits by which God’s grace can reach through us to others. This is from Martin Luther, the great Reformer – when he described the nature of God’s love, he used the metaphor of flowing, like waters in a mighty river. “*It flows forth,*” he writes, “*and bestows good.*”³ The backstory of our faith, the way God’s saving love and grace has flowed into our lives from those who have gone before us, indicates how God’s grace and love is now meant to flow through us to reach others – especially to flow into the lives of our children and youth that they might carry on in faith after us. Again, here is Luther: “*Good things flow from Christ and are flowing into us . . . These good things flow from us on to those who have need of them . . .*”⁴

So, what happens to the flow of God’s saving mercy and love which has reached our hearts and brought forth our declaration of commitment and intent to fear and serve the Lord in sincerity and faithfulness? Simple. We pass it on. To serve the Lord in sincerity and faithfulness is at least this much – that we let that saving mercy and grace flow through our lives into the lives of others, so that they might come to know what we have known. So that others might come to rest in the saving mercy and love of God as we have done so. We pass it on.

And the second meaning I would offer regarding what it means to make that declaration with Joshua, “*As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord,*” is that it involves our money. In fact, the Bible states that our money is an essential part of that commitment, simply because – as Jesus Himself pointed out to us last week – where our treasure is, there will our heart be also. Which has the corollary meaning that where our hearts are, there are money will follow. So, if the backstory of our faith is filled with God’s giving to us, then our response of commitment and intent means that a portion of our money – the Bible says a tithe, ten percent of our money – is to be freely and cheerfully and faithfully given back to God.

That's what stewardship is really all about. It's not about the church's budget, though it is very much about the work God seeks to accomplish through His church. But what stewardship is really all about is acknowledging the backstory of God's extraordinary gift to us of saving mercy and love. And then, in committed response – just like Joshua – pledging ourselves and our resources to Him going forward. Saying with our checkbooks – on-line or old school – and saying with our pledge cards, as well as saying with every other aspect of our devotion to Christ: *“As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”*

¹ I John 4:19.

² Elizabeth Achtemeier, Not Til I Have Done (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), pp. 3-4.

³ Quoted in Miroslav Volf, Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), p. 49.

⁴ Quoted in Volf, p50.