

# Choose Whom You Will Serve

By the Rev. Eric H. Carswell

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. (Joshua 24:15)

The choice that Joshua set before the children of Israel is also set before each of us in our lives. The first and great commandment is: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. (Matthew 22:37) Each person who truly loves the Lord will wish to serve Him.

When you reflect on the course of your daily life, how does your acknowledgment of the Lord as your God affect your life? We know that reflection and spiritual goal-setting is an important part of each person's pathway to heaven. At times each of us can consider which among our values, choices and deeds have their fundamental source in an acknowledgment of the Lord as God. And also which among these things are in conflict with what we know to be good and true.

In one sense, each person stands alone choosing the direction of his or her life. There is an basic conflict that goes on within the mind of each person here today. This same conflict is nearly as old as the human race itself. We are created so that both good and evil, truth and falsity meet and do battle within our minds. The conflicting desires within our minds can be attributed, in their simplest forms, to the essential choice presented to the children of Israel. Would they serve the idols of their forefathers or the gods of the Amorites, or would they follow the lead of Joshua and serve the Lord? For us this represents the choice between loving the things of the world, or ourselves, or loving the Lord.

Joshua offered the Israelites a choice. They could choose one of three alternatives. The first choice was whether they wanted to worship the gods which their forefathers had served on the other side of the River. Joshua had earlier spoken of the Israelites' forefathers, such as Terah, Abraham's father, as living on the other side of the River, that is, the river Euphrates. Terah had been an idolater, worshiping a god he knew

of as Shaddai, or "the almighty." He and others like him were ignorant of many basic truths that the Lord had revealed to earlier men.

While Joshua's first offered choice to the Israelites reflects the historical context of the time, it can also have a meaning that is applicable to every person in all ages. Joshua offered the Israelites the choice of worshiping the idols of their forefathers. We know that idolatry doesn't just mean bowing down to statues. Idolatry can be said to exist when there is a separation of spiritual values, such as love to the Lord and the neighbor, from the external actions of daily life and even worship. For example, we are told that those who call themselves Christians and say they worship Christ, and do not live according to what He teaches, are actually worshiping Him idolatrously. (Arcana Coelestia 3732:2) Idolatry can also be said to exist when someone chooses something in this world and makes the acquisition of it to be the highest good. Whenever a person does this, he makes that thing to be his god. For example, a person's desire to acquire money can rule over him as a most ruthless overlord. If he loves it above all other things, it is his god, and he will serve it daily. Money has a valuable use. It isn't bad in itself. But it becomes bad if it has so significant a role in our decision-making, that other more important things are neglected--like honesty. This is true of many other aspects of this world such as food, clothing, paying attention to our health, our homes, our cars, our vacations, the natural success of our children, even the natural success of this congregation. Too great a concern for all of these things can lead us to do things that are hurtful to ourselves and others. Having too great a concern for these things is represented by worshiping the gods of our forefathers.

Joshua also offered the children of Israel the possibility of serving the gods of the Amorites, in whose land they were then living. This alternative images a second choice that exists for all people. Anyone can also choose to love himself above all other things. The love of self means that our own needs, wants, and desires guide our decisions more than anything the Lord has said about what is good and true. When love of self above others is the ruler of someone, he is unwilling to be led by Lord, or by anyone else, except apparently, when it serves his ends. Such a person then also has a fundamental contempt and hatred of everyone who does not serve him. The ultimate result of this love is quite clear in the spiritual world; there those who have been ruled by the love of self seek to make themselves gods and to rule over all

others. A person can choose to make himself god and serve himself in all things.

Note how the two false choices which the Israelites were given had a particular attraction for them. One was gods their ancestors had always worshiped, and the other was the gods worshiped in the land where they presently lived. Similarly, the loves of self and the world have a ready attraction for us. We know that each of us was born with hereditary inclinations to these evils. Both love of the world and love of self above others comes quite naturally to us. Without a conscious process of studying the patterns of our actions, words, thoughts, and motives, recognizing specific ways in which evil loves and false ideas are destructively influencing what we do, and then shunning or consciously turning away from evil thoughts and actions as sins, they will remain with us and will be a means whereby evil spirits seek to lead us to hell. To avoid their path, our hereditary inclinations to love ourselves and the world must be recognized and removed by genuine repentance.

If we were left to ourselves without any guidance from the Lord, we wouldn't even be aware that we had a fundamental choice of values in our lives. In this sense, Joshua and what he said is like the Lord's Word, prompting us to recognize the choices that lie before us. Joshua told the children of Israel that they should choose this day whom they would serve, and he added, "But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." The Lord's Word not only presents us with the need to recognize and shun evil thoughts and actions and the loves that foster them, but in its entirety it testifies to obedience and service to the Lord. By its teachings we can learn how to recognize our hereditary inclinations and reject them. As these inclinations are rejected, we can ever more fully accept the Lord as our God and serve Him alone.

Even though our text presents a single moment of choice for the Israelites, we know that it does not exist as a single choice for us. We are confronted by this choice in every significant decision we make. Are we going to serve the Lord by obey His commandments, are we going to try to love others as He has loved us, or will we place love of self and the world above these precepts and serve those interests? Each decision we make strengthens us in a certain direction, but is not in itself conclusive. But, by the time we leave this world, we will have established the fundamental core of our values. We will have established a ruling love. We will have chosen whom we want to serve.

Although in one sense Joshua's challenge is presented to us in every significant decision we make, we cannot usefully approach many of them on the universal levels of love of self, the world, or the Lord. If someone tried to consciously hold this choice in the front of his mind in each of his decisions, it would probably be more destructive than constructive. Continuous or prolonged deep introspection is time-consuming and dangerous. This problem is avoided by following what the Lord has taught us about the process referred to in the Writings as "self examination." We are told that once or twice a year every adult should submit his the patterns of thought and action in his life to a deep, searching examination. (True Christian Religion 530) What the Lord calls us to watch for is important patterns of choices and states of mind that are contrary to what he teaches. Even during this examination, it is probably not advisable to look for love of self and the world in our thoughts and deeds. We may know with great certainty that these loves are there. Rather than attacking them as single entities, thereby attempting to fight against all of their influence at once, we should seek to recognize one or two specific forms that these loves take in our thoughts or deeds. If we seek to recognize one or two specific groups of evil acts or thoughts that we incline to, then we will be choosing a manageable fight.

A man may notice that almost every time his thoughts have time to wander, they quickly make their way to a consideration of his financial security and growth, while at the same time he has lost touch with his children and his responsibilities as their father. He will then try to put the financial thoughts out of his mind, at least some of the time, and instead will reflect on the developing states of his children.

A woman may notice within herself a quiet but strong tendency to manipulate those around her to go along with what she thinks is best. This manipulation may have an obvious expression in nagging or it may be so subtle that its victims are hardly aware of its presence. The end result is the same, the person being manipulated is pressured to act or think a certain way. This manipulation can have negative spiritual results for all who are involved. The woman who recognizes its significant presence in her life will try to allow others greater freedom to think and choose for themselves, certainly with appropriate discussion, but without the manipulation that she inclines to.

A third person may notice a tendency to get highly agitated when anyone corrects him or openly disagrees with his opinion. If his self

examination indicated that his reaction to the situation is thoughts of hatred against the offending individual rather than a concern for what is true, he may decide that he needs to work on this expression of the love of self.

In each of these cases, the individuals, having recognized a certain inclination to something evil, will work at shunning that expression of evil during the following days and months. Each day they will apply the findings of their last deep self examination in a review of their intentions, thoughts, and acts, to see if they are truly shunning the one or two evils they had previously observed. This is the form of daily self examination that we should practice. (cf. Arcana Coelestia 8391; True Christian Religion 539, The New Jerusalem and its Heavenly Doctrine 163)

It is useful to keep in mind that when we are examining ourselves, apparently we cannot know for certain how far we have progressed in our spiritual rebirth. Evil spirits constantly try to flow into our minds and convince us that we are nothing but evil and consequently that there is no hope for salvation. Or they try to convince us of the exact opposite, that we are so good that we don't need to seek salvation. It is also useful to know that a person also has a difficult time knowing if he is in the good of charity or not because the angels with him, when they recognize that he is reflecting upon the good in himself, may at once introduce the idea that he is not so good in order to prevent him from taking credit for this himself, and from sensing himself to be superior to others. (Arcana Coelestia 2380) Self examination has the primary purpose of indicating the evils within the examiner which should be worked on, and only secondarily giving him some idea of his spiritual state. There are however certain signs that indicate whether the power of our evil heredity has been lessened, or whether it strongly controls our thoughts and life. We can consider, for example, whether we at times sense a delight in helping another person just because it is a useful thing to do. (Arcana Coelestia 9499) Perhaps a person can gain some hope, assurance and an image of the ideal to strive for as he thinks about some of these aspects of his life.

The primary purpose of self examination is that a person should be led to see those evils in himself which he must try to shun as sins against the Lord. Day-by-day as you learn more from what the Lord has taught us and try to live according to it, the more perfect will be your ability to examine the patterns of your motives, thoughts, and actions. The truth we need to guide our lives may be gained from instruction in sermons

and classes, but particularly from individual reading. As we read what the Lord has revealed and approach Him in prayer, He speak to us, exhorting us or comforting us. Let us hear Him when He speaks through words, like those of Joshua, saying

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AMEN.

*Lessons: Joshua 24:1-7, 11-18, True Christian Religion 530*