

Read: Joshua 24.14-27.

God had made a covenant with his people at Mount Sinai. We hear the Lord saying, “Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession” (Ex. 19.5). A few chapters later we read that, when Moses read the Book of the Covenant to the people, they responded, “We will do everything the Lord has said; we will obey.” Moses sprinkled them with blood and said, “This is the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words” (24.7-8).

Joshua is pressing them hard. If they are to be the Lord’s people, then they must “throw away the gods your forefathers worshipped beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord.” No “hedging your bets” – you must make a choice. “But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord!” (Josh. 24.14,15)

Faced with the choice, “Far be it from us to forsake the Lord to serve other gods!... We too will serve the Lord, because he is our God” (vv. 16-18).

But the very first commandment says, “You shall have no other gods before [or, besides] me” (Ex. 20.3). Will they serve the Lord exclusively? To use an expression from human emotions, God is “jealous” (as also in Ex. 20.5) – there can be no rivals, no compromise.

As Joshua continues the pressure to ensure their determination to serve the Lord, he calls them to be “witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen to serve the Lord... Now then, throw away the foreign gods that are among you and yield your hearts to the Lord, the God of Israel” (John. 24.22-23).

Reflect:

- “Throw away the foreign gods...” They could hardly have been more definite in their commitment to serve the Lord, and yet – there were still those foreign gods tucked away! They were still “hedging their bets”! What are our “foreign gods”? What do we need to do so that we can fully and wholeheartedly “serve the Lord”?

3. The Lord is with you! Reading: 1 Chronicles 28.10-21; 29.10-20

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Studies for Home Groups
by Peter J Blackburn

2. CHOOSING THE LORD!

Reading: Joshua 23-24.1-27

The annual Melbourne Cup exposes the gambling spirit of many Australians. Many non-serious gamblers “have a fling” on that day, even though they show no interest in gambling for the rest of the year. But the serious gambler – for whom the stakes may run into many thousands – tries to develop a system that will (hopefully) ensure a good return most of the time.

A few years ago a friend of mine in Stanthorpe – a strict non-gambler – received an unsolicited letter proposing that he become part of a group to bet on various horse races. This is how it would work. If you signed up for the proposal, the promoter would send you weekly a list of horses on which you were to lay your bet. The only condition was that you bet an equal amount on behalf of the promoter. My friend isn’t dumb and quickly saw that the promoter only needed enough “suckers” to cover every horse in every race and he could guarantee himself a winner every time!

I suppose that’s “hedging your bets”. The old saying goes, “Don’t put all your eggs in the one basket.” Or, to quote the financial adviser on the radio, “It is always wise to diversify your portfolio.”

Sometimes we have wondered whether there is much difference between gambling and the stock market. Perhaps for some people there isn’t! Yet there is meant to be a fundamental difference. With gambling, you can only win if other people lose. With investment, you are giving a company the capital needed to earn a profit. In a competitive world, the level of that profit cannot be guaranteed. It is the speculative investors who gamble on the stock market.

Reflect:

- Quite aside from the gambling mentality, what are some of the ways in which Australians “hedge their bets”? To what extent does this attitude affect the way the “typical Aussie” relates to faith in God?

Joshua's Farewell

Read: Joshua 23.

Joshua was one of the twelve spies Moses had sent into the land of Canaan from Kadesh. They were to bring back a report of the land, its fertility, inhabitants, towns and cities. The report of the land itself was glowing, but ten of the spies were so overwhelmed by the military strength of the opposition that they persuaded the people it was impossible to possess the land. Only Joshua and Caleb were convinced that, trusting in the Lord's help, they could do it (Num. 13).

So Joshua became the leader of the new generation to bring them into the Promised Land. Moses commissioned Joshua with these words, "Be strong and courageous, for you must go with this people into the land that the Lord swore to their forefathers to give them, and you must divide it among them as their inheritance. The Lord himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged" (Deut. 31.7-8).

So, with God's help, they had conquered the land. They miraculously crossed the Jordan River and took the town of Jericho. Then, with God's help again, they took possession of all the main areas of Canaan. But now Joshua, at 110, is soon to die. He gathers the leaders of Israel to give his final instructions.

They are to remember what has been accomplished so far and to trust God for the complete possession of the land (vv. 3-5).

They are to "be careful to obey all that is written in the Book of the Law of Moses, without turning aside to the right or to the left" (v. 6). In particular, "Do not associate with these nations that remain among you; do not invoke the names of their gods or swear by them. You must not serve them or bow down to them. But you are to hold fast to the Lord your God, as you have until now" (vv. 7-8).

There could be no compromise with the religion of Canaan. It was a fertility religion – very tempting to those setting out on an agricultural life in a new land – and it involved ritual prostitution.

"The Lord has driven out before you great and powerful nations... the Lord your God fights for you... So be very careful to love the Lord your God" (vv. 9-10). They will cease to know the blessing of the Lord's help if they cease to be faithful to the Lord (vv. 12-13,14-16).

Reflect:

- What are some of the ways in which we have known the help and blessing of the Lord? To what extent do we face the temptation to forget about the Lord or simply take his help for granted?

Covenant Renewed

Read: Joshua 24.1-13.

The issue is whether they are going to be true to the covenant the Lord has made with them (23.16). The Lord has always been true to his promises, but will they be true to theirs?

Joshua gathers them at Shechem (near modern Nablus) – a significant place in their history. The Lord had confirmed his promise to Abraham here and Abraham had built an altar (Gen. 12.6). Jacob had bought land there and built an altar (33.19-20). It was also at Shechem also that Jacob had ordered his household, "Get rid of the foreign gods you have with you..." (35.2).

So Jacob reminds them of the history of the Lord's dealings with the nation from Abraham's father, Terah, up to the present time. "Long ago, your forefathers, including Terah the father of Abraham and Nahor, lived beyond the River [Euphrates] and worshipped other gods" (24.2). We aren't told the nature of these "other gods". We do know that Laban had "household gods" (*teraphim*) which were stolen by Rachel (Gen. 31.19,34).

To what extent had Abraham been involved in idolatrous worship before God called him? We don't know. It has been a matter of debate among Jewish Rabbis over many years. What we do know is that the one true God called him out of that situation.

Through their history the Lord has worked on their behalf – to deliver them from the Egyptians (Josh. 24.5-7), to destroy the Amorites, to bless them through Balak who had been commissioned to curse them (vv. 8-10), and now to give them the land. "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" (v. 13).

Reflect:

- We receive so much for which we haven't worked. Why is it so important to remember our history and God's work on our behalf?