

THE JEALOUS GOD VS. THE OTHER GODS

JOSHUA 24:14-28

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In our First Scripture Lesson this morning, from the 24th chapter of the book of Joshua, we are presented with a solemn scene from the history of ancient Israel. Here, now advanced in years, stands the great leader Joshua, before the people of God. When the great prophet and liberator, Moses, had died without bringing the nation to its final destination to possess the land of Canaan, Joshua was called to step into those very large shoes, and to take the people on to possess their inheritance. Joshua led them across the Jordan River and into the land of Canaan, where the Israelites won one battle after another over the years, conquering and then settling in by their various tribes into the newly won land of Canaan which was becoming theirs. Now, Joshua was near the end of his life. He was fighting no more battles, he was stepping down from his leadership position. And as Moses, so many years before, had stood before the nation in the days before his imminent death to charge them and to challenge them to be faithful to the Covenant which God made with them, so now, Joshua gives his final charge to the national and tribal leaders, calling them to faithfulness.

If you were to go back and read the series of verses just prior to the passage which formed our First Lesson this morning, you would see that Joshua begins, as Moses had done years before, by recounting for them all the way that God has led them, the

mighty power that lifted them up out of bondage in Egypt, rescued them, and brought them carefully through the wilderness protecting them, and nourishing them until at last, He planted them in the Promised Land where they settled into towns and villages which they did not build, took ownership of fields they had not plowed, and enjoyed the fruit of vineyards which they had not planted. And then, Joshua admonished them, setting before them the stark choice they have: either to serve the true God, or to serve the false gods, the idols of the nations which have just proven themselves to be impotent against the advance of the holy nation. “Now therefore, fear the LORD, serve Him in sincerity and in truth, and put away the gods which your fathers served on the other side of the River and in Egypt. Serve the LORD!” (v. 14). “Look,” says Joshua, “if it seems evil to you to serve the Lord, then choose whom you will serve” –he implies that they *must serve someone*, that there is no neutral ground – “pick one or more of the gods from among the peoples you have just conquered and serve them.” Then comes that very famous statement which Joshua makes, “But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord” (v. 15).

Now the people respond to Joshua’s charge. A dialogue begins, a conversation between Joshua and the people, that for all its solemnity is downright humorous at certain points. Because the people respond to Joshua and say, “Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods!” (v. 16). Or to paraphrase their response, “Joshua! What are you talking about? Of course we will worship God in every facet of our lives, of course we will remain faithful to Him! After all, as you just

reminded us, He rescued us from slavery and drove out the peoples of this land before us! We will serve the one true God, He is our God

Now, listen to the unexpected answer from Joshua in verse 19 of our passage: “You cannot serve the Lord, for He is a holy God, He is a jealous God; He will not forgive your transgressions nor your sins.” This is one of those verses that reminds us that you cannot take one verse, wrench it out of its context in the Bible, and throw it at someone as proof of your favorite theological position. I mean, imagine that you made a comment to someone about the fact that we ought to serve the Lord, and that though we too often fail in this service, He forgives us our sins. Imagine if the other person responded, “Oh no, Joshua 24:19, “You cannot serve the Lord . . . He will not forgive your transgressions nor your sins!” You’d be a bit taken aback! You would wonder in fact, “Well, then, what’s the point?”

But there it is. Joshua said, “You can’t serve the Lord.” Why Joshua? “Because,” says Joshua, “He is a jealous God, and because He won’t forgive your sins!” But listen to the rest of what Joshua says: “If you forsake the Lord and serve foreign gods, then He will turn and do you harm and consume you” (v. 20). And the dialogue continues, the people, regardless of Joshua’s shocking and stern response answer back “No, but we will serve the Lord!” (v. 21). Joshua responds, “You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen the Lord for yourselves” (v. 22). We feel that we have moved into a courtroom drama at this point. The defendant, the accused, is in the witness box, and the prosecutor is forcing the accused, from his own lips, to point the finger at himself, declare himself guilty, by carefully maneuvering his statements so that he will hang

himself. That's what Joshua is doing. For when the people exclaim, "We are witnesses!" (v.22), Joshua knocks them between the eyes: "Now therefore," – which is to say, "if that is the case" – "put away the foreign gods which are among you, and incline your heart to the Lord God of Israel" (v. 24). Ah! Now we understand why Joshua is giving them the third degree. Now we understand why he was so unrelenting in his insistence that they could not serve the Lord – because they were attempting to worship God, and then to have some other gods, the very gods of the nations which they came to conquer. Now we understand what Joshua meant when He said that God is a *jealous* God. He meant, that God would never permit His people, to enjoy a relationship with Him with all of its benefits and blessings, all the while giving themselves to false gods and goddesses of the pagan nations. After all they had witnessed as God brought them through the wilderness and into the land He had promised. After hearing the stern warnings of Moses that they must not imitate the vile practices of surrounding nations and adopt their deities. After being participants in the victorious seizure of the land. After all of *this*, they had collected idols from the pagan nations, and were already beginning the terrible practice of combining the worship of the Almighty God with that of false gods. That's why Joshua told them they could not really serve God, because God is *jealous*.

Now of all the divine attributes, the *jealousy* of God, is the one probably most hated, and most misunderstood today. Our generation despises the very idea. It's almost always associated with the idea that the God of the Bible is vindictive, mean, cantankerous. He explodes in wrath. He's mistrustful, and not to be trusted Himself.

He's got control issues, He's demanding. He's on a power trip. But that's because the contemporary mind wants a God Whose some kind of neutral, bland, impersonal, sort of spirit-blob that makes no demands, insists on no standards, issues no commands. He does not prefer one kind of behavior to another. Spirituality without commandments. Divinity without definition.

But the God revealed to us in Holy Scripture is far more interesting, far more colorful, far more invested in our well being. In fact, the God of the Bible is pictured as a lover, as the Original Lover. Imagine that you are witness to a discussion between a husband and wife. The wife asks the husband if he loves her, if he puts her first, if she is the most important person in his life. In answer to her interrogations, he replies, repeatedly, and consistently, that he loves her more than anyone, that she is the most important person in his life, his first priority and concern. You begin to wonder as you listen to this discussion. Why is she asking him over and over again? He's answered her. Why is she giving him the third degree? And then you hear the wife say, "Well, if that's the case, then you're going to have to give up the two or three mistresses you are currently seeing." And then you say, "Ah, now I get it." We expect a spouse to be *jealous*. Not paranoid, not controlling or manipulative, but jealous for the love of their spouse. No normal spouse wants to share their husband or wife with someone else. Every normal married person wants their spouse to be faithful. They love, and they expect their love to be requited.

And God is a lover. He loves His people. He desires, its unfathomable, to take those whom He has redeemed into the union with Himself that they might know Him,

revel in His love and glory for all eternity. And He does not wish for us to go after other loves, other spouses, other gods.

Today, we find that in our culture, there are a host of gods that clamor for our attention, and more than that, for our allegiance, who are quite happy for us to think whatever we like between our ears, to adopt whatever theological position we wish, to engage in our favorite religious rituals and to conduct our beautiful ceremonies, *so long as we don't worship the God of the Bible exclusively, so long as we don't permit our beliefs to "leak out" into the public sector and affect our lives, so long as we never say, God is a certain kind of God, with certain demands, certain characteristics – so long as we never say that God is a jealous God.*

In the ancient city of Rome, there was, and still stands, a building called the Pantheon. It's a Greek word that means "every god," or "all gods." Into this one building, roofed with a dome to represent the entire cosmos, the universe, were housed the statues of the various gods whom the pagan Romans worshipped. You see you didn't ask which god was the true god – they all co-existed, not one of them could style himself or herself the maker of heaven and earth. Today, our culture has its own pantheon of gods. Every culture has its prevailing values, its prevailing trends. If we actually had a building which represented our cultural paradigm, we could hang a sign over its entrance, "The Spirit of the Age." The gods our culture demands that we invoke and reverence and heed would all be housed there. And we could walk in and view these deities.

We would see in this imaginary building, the great god of “Tolerance.” We are told to genuflect before the god of Tolerance. To tolerate every perspective, every type of behavior, every theological, philosophical, and political opinion. Except, “tolerance” doesn’t actually mean tolerance. Behind the label “tolerance,” is the true label “acceptance.” Our culture says we must not only co-exist with those of diametrically opposed ethics, we must embrace their ethics. Whatever we want to believe on Sunday, whatever sacred book we want to read or songs we want to sing, fine. But the rest of week, you must celebrate the notion that there is no absolute truth, that everyone’s opinion is equally valid, and that there certainly is no sovereign God Who demands obedience to His Law. That perspective will not be tolerated.

In our pantheon of prevailing cultural gods, we would see another idol labeled “Freedom,” or perhaps “Liberty,” or perhaps, “Individual Rights.” It sounds good. Who doesn’t like freedom? Freedom is as American as baseball and apple pie! That’s what we are all about. But our culture has a twisted understanding of the true nature of freedom. Freedom means I have absolute sovereignty over my body. Freedom today has come to mean that I may do whatever I please, and then turn around and say, it’s OK so long as no one gets hurt, and *so long as I get to be the one that determines whether my neighbor or my society is being harmed by my actions.* So fine, says our culture to us, worship Jesus, read the Bible, take Communion, do whatever feels right to you, but never permit the rule of your life or the ethical code by which you abide, to transgress the private sphere of your home and your individual life. This god, the god of false freedom, binds the hearts and lives of countless persons in our society today. Under the

aegis of this deity, every form of sexual perversion is celebrated. Marriage and the family are eradicated by being redefined. The results of my behavior then must be dealt with, so we kill the unborn and the elderly, or we celebrate the right to commit suicide. And we bow and worship and say, "We are free. No fetters bind our lives." But as Jesus told the Pharisees so many years ago, "Whoever commits sins is the slave of sin."

And then I think right next to the great god False Freedom, would stand in our pantheon the god Self Esteem. I'm not talking about a healthy and accurate understanding of one's self worth as created in the image of God and as endowed by God with gifts and skills. I'm talking about what I call self esteem on steroids. A fixation on self. We have national talk show hosts on television, and authors, and seminar leaders preaching a new religion, an old religion really, of the god of self. They exhort us to delve deep with our own selves in order to encounter the divine. It's OK, they think, to maintain a semblance of Christianity, to talk about Jesus and eternal life and all that, so long as we re-interpret the Christian faith as a religion of self-esteem and self-promotion and read the Bible as a book of tips on how we can be successful and get ahead in life.

Nearby would stand the great idol Happiness. Happiness is taken so seriously in America. It's our chief goal, it's practically a religion. And yet we find that happiness is ever more elusive the more we try to chase it. We try to be happy, to keep ourselves constantly entertained and amused. Our culture tells us it's OK to worship God on Sunday, so long as we replace the awe inspiring worship of the holy God with an entertainment focus that makes us "feel good" at church.

And then, close by the god Happiness in our culture's pantheon, we find the deity called Mammon, the great god who demands our total commitment in the vain attempt to find permanent happiness and purpose in material possessions.

And next to Mammon would be the great American deity of Frenzy, of Busyness. Have you noticed how important it is in America these days to be *busy*. You haven't seen someone in a while and you ask them how they are doing, and they say, "Oh, you know *BUSY*." Busyness has become a virtue. Not just diligence at your work, but a kind of unceasing frenzy of activity. Our marketers fuel the flames of frenzy by constantly admonishing us that we ought to be bombarded on a minute by minute basis with emails, and internet information, and news reports and sound bites, and text messages, and phone calls. Our technical tools make it possible for us to be connected to the grid twenty four hours a day, seven days a week. This cultural deity never permits us to come away, never permits us to stop, never allows us to pause and to reflect and to be quiet and to meditate upon Holy Scripture and to pray and to look toward the Face of God. We're just too busy!

I'm going to stop with the tour of this pantheon. I'm not going to list all the gods that stand as rivals to the jealous God Who loves us and wants to see us wholly devoted to Him. But this week, I exhort you to be aware. As you watch television, as you are on the internet, as you engage with co-workers, as you observe our marketing messages and techniques splattered across our freeways, notice the prevailing values, messages, ethical demands. Be aware of the gods of our culture. What deities in our pantheon are you being called to worship and to reverence? What demands are you being called to

obey? How are you being molded by the culture's insistent demand that you "fit in" that you "conform" to its paradigm, that you march to its drumbeat?

And then be aware of yourself. Every single one of us here this morning has little idols tucked away in the private recesses of his or her life. I'm not going to name these idols because I'll miss yours. But they are there, and they say, "Sure, go ahead, follow Jesus, but hang on to us too." If Joshua stood before this congregation this morning, would he not say, "You cannot serve the Lord, because He is a jealous God"? Would we not all respond, "Joshua, He is our God, we will worship Him—we are here this morning to do that very thing!" And would not Joshua respond, "Put away the foreign gods which *are* among you, and incline your heart to the LORD God of Israel" (v.23).

On the morning of Monday, February 5, 1940, a lecture was given in the Divinity lecture hall, boasting its exquisite 15th century fan vaulted ceiling. The lecturer was the great Christian poet, novelist, and Oxford University Press editor, Charles Williams. The hall was jam packed with young men and women, many of them having just come up to Oxford to study, and many of them were fully expecting to be called into active military service as the Second World War raged across Europe. Charles Williams was there to lecture on a piece of poetry by the great 16th century poet John Milton. But he wisely used the opportunity to speak to his audience concerning sexual purity, chastity, the nobility of keeping oneself pure before marriage, and faithful after marriage. Williams' audience, all young people influenced by a generation of philosophers and psychologists who had called upon their generation to jettison traditional Christian morality and follow one's impulses, do what's "natural", in fact, to consider chastity

completely outdated, utterly impractical, and downright ridiculous. But Williams spoke to them with earnestness and commitment and urgency.

One of those present at the lecture, was Charles Williams' close personal friend C.S. Lewis. Lewis was deeply impressed by his friends boldness, and by the audiences fascination. Lewis remarked that Williams lecture was important,

But it was more important still as a sermon. It was a beautiful sight to see a whole room full of modern young men and women, sitting in that absolute silence which can *not* be faked, very puzzled, but spell bound . . . He forced them to lap it up and I think many, by the end, liked the taste more than they expected to. It was "borne in upon me" that that beautiful carved room had probably not witnessed anything so important since some of the great medieval or Reformation lectures. I have at last, if only for once, seen a university doing what it was founded to do: teaching Wisdom. *And what a wonderful power there is in the direct appeal which disregards the temporary climate of opinion.*

Will you disregard the "temporary climate of opinion?" Will you put away all the gods that our clamoring culture demands that we worship? Will you, by God's grace, root out and throw out the false gods tucked away in your life? Will turn in single heartedness to the jealous God, the *loving* God Who cannot tolerate anything in your life that will ruin you now and for eternity. Let us ignore the persistent drumbeat of our

generation's demands for conformity, and accept that the fashion and the gods of this world are passing away, that it is only temporary, but the Word of the Lord, and the Lord that gave us His Word, endures forever.