

Keeper of Promises

Joshua 24

There is a debate people have about predestination and free will.

On one side, some believe God is in control – so he must control everything.

On the other, some believe God gives us free will so we can do anything.

Let me try to provide some perspective on this dilemma.

On the surface, this passage of scripture is about choice and consequence.

God delivers his people from Egypt in the book of Exodus.

He leads them through the desert to Canaan, the land he promised them.

But they are afraid and they refuse to go in.

They are granted their wish.

They wander in the desert for 40 years until the generation from Egypt dies off.

The only exceptions are Joshua and Caleb who insisted that they trust God.

Right before they enter again, Moses gives them a warning to follow God.

Moses himself dies on a mountain overlooking the promised land.

His protégé Joshua leads the Israelites into Canaan.

Miraculously, they defeat armies that outclass them.

When all the battles are finally done 15-20 years later, Israel settles.

Joshua then challenges the people to a choice – to serve God or not.

The people say that they will serve God.

Joshua warns them about going back on their word.

The people insist.

Joshua accepts this and they make a covenant with God.

As the story goes, they keep faith for a generation or so.

After that, as described in the book of Judges, people do their own thing.

The consequence is disastrous.

Now I need to explain one more thing, and that is the concept of the covenant.

A covenant is different from a contract.

A contract places expectations by two parties that is based on benefit.

Usually our contracts have to do with economic, material and service exchange.

Contracts are written in order to protect parties from each other.

A covenant, however, is not based on gain and benefit, but relationship.

In many ancient covenants, honour and integrity played a role.

A more powerful nation would covenant with a smaller nation.

Protection, trade, exchange of good was a part of this.

The stronger partner would act with grace and the weaker would act in trust.
The Biblical concept, however, moves this even further.
A covenant is based entirely on grace and good will.

In a term that is usually not used in contracts, the covenant is based
Faithfulness, even love.

The cost of breaking covenant is the breaking of the relationship.
But if one party breaks faith, the other does not necessarily break theirs.

It is like a friendship in which one person stops being a friend.

The one who kept the friendship can let it go or continue good-will.

In most ancient settings breaking covenant had dire consequences.

Israel broke covenant repeatedly through idolatry.

But in this God kept the covenant despite this.

The invitation to return to relationship was always there.

So that is a covenant versus a contract.

In fact, our church and its pastors do not have contracts.

We have covenants based on relationships, goodwill, trust and love.

Now, what does covenant and Joshua have to do with us?

Well, our reality is that the choice is still before us.

God offers covenant to us.

We either live within a relationship with God or we don't.

Another way we put this is either we live like he is real or we don't.

Either we really know him or we don't.

We can always play at knowing God and giving him lip service

Or we can really pray and listen to him and seek meet with him.

And frankly, there are consequences to our choice.

We either live a life with him as God or we don't.

Now, I don't expect you to get everything right off the bat.

Even I have days where I catch myself not thinking much of God.

But what is expected is that we desire to learn to live with him and love him.

It is an all-encompassing pursuit involving our intellect, affections and will.

Now this allows me to turn towards the question of free will and sovereignty.

It isn't just God is sovereign and that's that.

Nor is it we have free will and that's that.

It's not that fixed and rigid.

An example is that I am the man of the house.

My wife and children have their own thoughts and feelings.

If I simply demanded that my will be done at home,

The likelihood is that I would be divorced and childless.

At the same time, if my children or wife acted in the same way demanding their own way, it would be a very unpleasant place.

Unfortunately, some households, perhaps even your own was or is that way.

A good father asks for obedience but is also worthy of obedience.

This is because his will is for the good of his children.

A good friend becomes a friend because they care about you.

Our God, calls us into a relationship of love and friendship.

And there are blessings in trusting him.

Love is never demanded but offered and invited.

On the other hand, to reject that love and relationship has consequences.

A person who does not choose God is not so much cursed by God

But is devoid of God's desired blessings.

And so there is a mutual dynamic between sovereignty and free will.

The invitations and promises of God seem like bondage and demands to those who do not trust him.

One more thing I need to share is this.

James Bryan Smith, author of "The Good and Beautiful God"

Writes that our will is our ability to make choices.

But our will is influenced and shaped by three things.

The mind, the body and social context.

I call it what we think, how we feel and who's around.

We can think rightly or wrongly of God.

We can feel positively or negatively about God.

And we can be influenced by those around us and their voices regarding God.

Christian growth is dependent on how pursue and understanding of God.

Reading and studying the stories of people in the Bible help us learn.

Taking time to be still and pray tempers our feelings.

Considering the culture, society and even people we are with makes a difference.

On the missional front,

Do we want to understand who God is communicate that?

Do we want to live and speak of God as if we really love him and he us?

Do we encourage those who are around us to seek him?

Joshua's challenge is for us today.
I lay before you today this choice.
Will you seek Jesus out?

As for me and my household, yes.
Because I trust he keeps his promises.

Questions:

How do your understanding, feelings and influences affect your relationship with God?

How does your relationship with God affect your understanding, feelings and influence?