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Joshua then said to the people, "You will not be able to serve Yahweh, since he is a holy God, he is a jealous God who will not tolerate either your misdeeds or your sins. If you desert Yahweh and serve the foreigners' gods, he will turn and maltreat you anew and, in spite of having been good to you in the past, will destroy you." (Joshua 24:19-20 NJB)

Living the Straight Path

Israel has won. It has been victorious in conquering the land of Canaan. Joshua has redistributed the land to the twelve tribes, and now Joshua's work is done. He is 110 years old, and he is ready die. Yet before he does, he summons "all of Israel, their elders and heads, their judges and officers" (23:2) and tells them not once, twice, or three times, but four times! (23:1-13, 23:14-16, 24:14-18, 24:19-28) that either they obey the laws of Moses, not to follow foreign gods, not to mix culturally and religiously with the other nations, or Yahweh will abandon them. He repeats the admonitions over and over. The people protest that they have decided to follow the God of their ancestors, who brought them out of Egypt, out of slavery, but Joshua demands that they say it all over again. Joshua sets a large stone under an oak at Shechem to witness to the covenant they have made, and which will testify against them should their witness prove false. He then goes to a predetermined spot and dies, and is buried.

No matter how many times we hear something pounded into our heads, we still think we know better. Rationalization, to me, is the greatest enemy to faithfulness. The smarter we are, the worse the plight. Humans have an uncanny ability to be able to find an excuse for anything. I know it's wrong but... Yes, it's bad but there's other things so much worse... If I didn't do it someone else would have... There's always time to change, but right now I just can't...

Joshua knows that the sole and only reason for the success and good fortune of the Israelites is Yahweh himself. Yahweh fought for Israel and it won the battles, and acquired the Promised Land. Israel was faithful to God, and "not one thing has failed of all the good things that Yahweh your God promised concerning you; all have come to pass for you, not one of them has failed." (23-14b) Now Joshua challenges the people: can they remain loyal to God alone, or will they serve other gods? They will choose their destiny. Their own oath will condemn them should they turn away.

It is no different for us. We only need to substitute for Baal the gods which we are tempted to serve: Mammon/wealth, Mars/violence, Eros/sex, gods without proper names such as pride, power, and civil religion. As Christians we do not follow the law of Moses as such but the teachings of Jesus Christ. We have traditions going back to the gospels, the rest of the New Testament, and the early church. The road map has been handed down to us to lead our way. And yet we are tempted to take detours at every mile of the path. And we do take them, since our enlightened minds convince us that it's perfectly acceptable to do so. That word again - rationalization. Jesus warned us about substituting the laws of men for the laws of God. Yet time wears away at the warning, and our best methods of logic, reason, science, and psychology are there to tell us our forebears had it all wrong. Humanity grown up, out of ignorant adolescence, the intellectuals tell us. We ignore the warning of Joshua at our own peril.

"Then banish the foreign gods which you have with you and give your allegiance to Yahweh, the God of Israel!" The people replied to Joshua, "Yahweh our God is the one whom we shall serve; his voice we shall obey!" (24:23-24) The same question is posed to me and to you.

Lord God, give me the wisdom to discern your ways from worldly ways. Those who follow other gods try to confuse me, and tell me the ways of the faithful are outdated, outmoded, and inappropriate today. Give me the strength and perseverance I need to recognize the straight path versus the curves and detours. I cannot do it alone, but send your Spirit to guide me and I can find the way. I pray this in the name of your Son Jesus Christ. Amen