

## Serve the LORD

✠ in families first (vv.1-2a,14-15)

✠ in growing gratitude (vv.16-18)

In the name of Jesus, our New Testament Joshua, dearly redeemed family of God:

There are some kinds of service that don't really need a command. For instance a young boy was bragging about finger nail marks on his legs. "My mom did that!" he announced proudly. "Why?" you ask? The boy had fallen into a Florida canal. An alligator thought he'd make a good lunch. On pure instinct his mother jumped in and waged a tug-of-war for her little boy's life. The reptile finally gave up because his mother would not. Would you say you're that determined to **Serve the LORD**?

The old deliverer Joshua had served under Moses. Joshua had watched the fathers of these Israelites die in the desert for forty years because of their rebellion against God. Now Moses was gone, Joshua was old, and Israel was settled in the Promised Land. Sin and death would wage a tug-of-war for their souls. The reptile of hell still wants to sink his teeth into us and our loved ones. Satan starts...

✠ in families first (vv.1-2a,14-15)

Sometime before our text Joshua had called a summit meeting of Israel's leaders. He reminded them of something we all need to remember whether we're single or blessed with a family. ***"Not one of all the good promises the LORD your God gave you has failed. Every promise has been fulfilled; not one has failed."*** Great and powerful nations had fallen before Israel's armies after the walls of Jericho came tumbling down. But just as the LORD always keeps His promises, so the **families** of Israel needed to take Joshua's warning to heart: ***"But just as every good promise of the LORD your God has come true, so the LORD will bring on you all the evil he has threatened, until he has destroyed you from this good land he has given you. If you violate the covenant of the LORD your God, which he commanded you, and go and serve other gods and bow down to them, the LORD's anger will burn against you, and you will quickly perish from the good land he has given you."*** (23:14-16 NIV84)

Many a Christian has assumed that getting to church now and then is enough. They try to keep the LORD at arm's length. But a distant Savior does no more good than a distant grocery store. You can't sit on a mountaintop somewhere and assume, "God will take care of me." He does not want us to presume on His promises by ignoring His warnings: ***"Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life."*** (Galatians 6:7f NIV84)

Personally, I love that passage. I hear the Lord's warning for my sinful nature that wants to take God's grace for granted and commit the sin of presumption, assuming that all God's promises will come true no matter what I do. That's my sinful nature talking. But the Holy Spirit assures me He will work in God's Word as long as I keep working God's Word in my life – listening, meditating, taking it to heart. Isn't that the point of Psalm 1? ***"Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers."*** (Psalm 1:1-3 NIV84)

With all the people assembled in a national meeting Joshua reminded them of the awesome way God cared for their ancestors – Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He gave them the Promised Land, delivered them from slavery in Egypt, patiently put up with rebellion in the desert forty years, then gave them victories to bring their families home to their own property. But they're not home to heaven yet.

Maybe our own family history looks like Israel in the desert: generations of heartache between fathers and their children, sibling rivalry, crushing divorce. Here's the wonderful blessing, God's powerful encouragement for you today: It does not have to be that way. We just need, like the Israelites, to rely on the LORD's strength instead of our own. We confess our sin and wretchedness with Paul, then shout with him in triumph: ***"Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord."*** (Romans 7:24f)

By faith Joshua stood strong in his commitment, resting in hope on God's promises. Joshua saw our Jesus coming as the ultimate Deliverer from sin, death and hell: ***"Now fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your forefathers worshiped beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD."***

God starts **in families first**. His warnings are real. Some teenagers have forgotten their Catechism and also their Confirmation promises. When life is good, we easily forget the LORD. When life is hard, we're tempted by guilt not to go back to God. But He keeps calling in mercy: ***"Come now, let us reason together," says the LORD. "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool. If you are willing and obedient, you will eat the best from the land; but if you resist and rebel, you will be devoured by the sword."*** For the mouth of the LORD has spoken." (Isaiah 1:18–20 NIV84) **In families first we Serve the LORD ...**

### **✠ in growing gratitude (vv.16-18)**

A good friend of mine once told me about the troubles he had growing up. So much heartache. But in his later years, he can look back with greater wisdom and say: "I don't understand everything that happened to me. All I can say is, 'Thanks be to God.'" In all the twists and turns of life, God keeps guiding and blessing him. He wants to **Serve the LORD – in growing gratitude**.

That's one advantage these Israelite leaders had. They were first generation immigrants who could still remember the trials and tribulations that brought to the Promised Land. German from Russia had a saying: "The first generation knows want, the second can eat, the third enjoys plenty." Israel's first generation with Joshua fought the battles and saw the LORD's mighty deliverance. So they quickly responded to Joshua's warning: ***"Far be it from us to forsake the LORD to serve other gods! It was the LORD our God himself who brought us and our fathers up out of Egypt, from that land of slavery, and performed those great signs before our eyes. He protected us on our entire journey and among all the nations through which we traveled. And the LORD drove out before us all the nations, including the Amorites, who lived in the land. We too will serve the LORD, because he is our God."*** So sincere!

But see where their confidence lies? They're trusting in themselves. So Joshua warned: ***"You are not able to serve the LORD. He is a holy God; he is a jealous God. He will not forgive your rebellion and your sins. If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, he will turn and bring disaster on you and make an end of you, after he has been good to you."*** But the people said to Joshua, ***"No! We will serve the LORD."*** Then Joshua said, ***"You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen to serve the LORD."*** ***"Yes, we are witnesses," they replied.***" (Joshua 24:19–22 NIV84) See the solution?

Remember the little boy in Herman Gockel's devotion book, *My Hand in His?* Walking with his father, he slipped on the ice. But when his dad tried to take his hand, the boy refused. Soon he slipped again. Down he went. This time he said, "Here, Dad. You take my hand. I'm too small."

Maybe you've suffered challenges lately, slipping, falling, or feeling like some swamp creature's got a hold on you. But Jesus won't let you go. The nail marks in your legs match the nail marks in His hands that stretched out on the cross for you. His blood washed your sins away. Guarding us always, He says, ***"My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand."*** (John 10:27f NIV84) Our strength and comfort come from this: God's got a grip on you. **Serve the LORD** for Jesus' sake. Amen.