

Who knew Joshua was the kind of guy who wouldn't take “yes” for an answer? When Joshua summoned the elders, the heads of the tribes, the judges, and the officers of Israel and asked them if they and their households were willing to serve the LORD – those patriarchal leaders said they would serve the LORD their God. But obviously Joshua didn't believe them. It was like he didn't think their “yes” was truly a “yes”! Why do you think that was? Could it be that because Joshua had spent a lot of time with these people over the years he knew when he was hearing a “polite yes” – not a “sincere yes”? Joshua knew they were just saying what they thought he wanted them to say.

Joshua counters their response by saying,

*“You cannot serve the LORD, for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins. If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm, and consume you, after having done you good.”*

*(Joshua 24:19b-21 NRSV)*

In my ears, what Joshua said reminds me of Jack Nicholson in the movie, “A Few Good Men,” when he said, “You can't handle the TRUTH!” Because with the Israelites track record, Joshua didn't believe they could handle serving the LORD.

But then the patriarchal leaders started scrambling to convince Joshua, “No, we will serve the LORD!” Joshua still didn't really believe them. He told them, “You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen the LORD, to serve him.” The patriarchal leaders were all on board with that and said, “We are witnesses.” Joshua still had his doubts about their sincerity. He told them, “Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your hearts to the LORD, the God of Israel.” I think that highlights what Joshua believed was the truth: that all along the Israelites had been hedging – they'd been worshipping BOTH the LORD AND other gods. Their hearts, their devotion, their loyalties had been divided. But now the time had come for them to decide who they would worship and serve. This was the time for all these leaders to fully commit themselves and their households to ONLY worshipping and serving the LORD, the God of Israel. But they couldn't quite bring themselves to say that they would exclusively ONLY worship and serve the one living God of Israel. I think they tried to IMPLY that, but they still left themselves some wiggle room when they said to Joshua, “The LORD our God we will serve, and him we will obey.” And Joshua must have known that was all he could get from them, so he made a covenant with them, and wrote down statutes and ordinances for them. Why were there more statutes and ordinances? Because Joshua clearly thought they needed them! And then he took a large stone and set it up to be a witness against them.

I know, I know, I KNOW! Joshua was BIG on using rocks to symbolize things. And he was right – a large stone can be a hard to ignore reminder. I believe Joshua might have

also just been tired of having to repeat everything over and over again, so if he could just point to a stone that bore witness to what had already been said – then he didn't have to say it again. And that stone could continue to bear witness to their decision to serve and obey the LORD their God long after Joshua was dead and buried. It served a purpose.

Do we need to set up a stone to bear witness to our decision to serve the LORD our God? Would a stone witness help us to stay focused on loving God and loving others? Would a stone witness encourage us – or guilt us? Or could it remind us that we can keep choosing God – over and over again – as the One we will serve, the One we will obey? That we can refresh and renew our commitment to God with each task that comes to hand, with each fresh encounter or situation that we find ourselves in, if we ask ourselves, “How am I serving God in this moment?” And at the end of each day we can give thanks to God for all these different ways we have been able to serve God.

As an example of how to go about living this way, let me share with you a little bit about Nicholas Herman who was born in 1614 in Hériménil, France to parents who were peasants. Nicholas grew up and fought in the Thirty Years' War. His experience of serving in the army during the war not only left him with a permanent limp, it also profoundly wounded his spirit. But then he had what could be termed a spiritual reawakening to the presence of God in his life. And at age 26 he entered the Order of Discalced Carmelites in Paris, taking the religious name “Lawrence of the Resurrection.” More commonly known as Brother Lawrence, he spent most of his adult life working in the order's kitchen. So think about the daily tasks he'd have to do in the kitchen around the year 1650, as part of this community of religious brothers. How do you think Brother Lawrence would go about serving God each day in that setting?

After his death, some of Brother Lawrence's reflections were gathered into a book, *The Practice of the Presence of God*. Let me share a few with you:

*“The most holy and important practice in the spiritual life is the presence of God – that is, every moment to take great pleasure that God is with you.”*

*“He does not ask much of us, merely a thought of Him from time to time, a little act of adoration, sometimes to ask for His grace, sometimes to offer Him your sufferings, at other times to thank Him for the graces, past and present, He has bestowed on you, in the midst of your troubles to take solace in Him as often as you can. Lift up your heart to Him during your meals and in company; the least little remembrance will always be the most pleasing to Him. One need not cry out very loudly; He is nearer to us than we think.”*

*“That we need to recognize God intimately present with us, to address ourselves to Him every moment, that we may beg His assistance for knowing*

*His will in things doubtful, and for rightly performing those which we plainly see He requires of us, offering them to Him before we do them, and giving Him thanks when we have done.”*

*“Let us think often that our only business in this life is to please God. Perhaps all besides is but folly and vanity.”*

*“We ought not to be weary of doing little things for the love of God, who regards not the greatness of the work, but the love with which it is performed.”*

*“Loving God and loving one’s neighbor are really the same thing.”*

*“That all things are possible to him who believes, that they are less difficult to him who hopes, they are more easy to him who loves, and still more easy to him who perseveres in the practice of these three virtues.”*

*“My only prayer practice is attention. I carry on a habitual, silent, and secret conversation with God that fills me with overwhelming joy.”*

*“We ought to propose to ourselves to become, in this life, the most perfect worshippers of God we can possibly be, as we hope to be through all eternity.”*

My friends, let us keep making the decision to worship, love, obey, and serve God.  
Amen.