

The Anatomy of Apostasy (1)

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[0 : 00] There are few things more painful in the Christian life than when our friends and mentors fall away from the faith. They no longer call themselves Christians. Those through whose preaching we became Christians have turned their backs on the faith. Those whose fellowship we once enjoyed have renounced their belief in Christ. I'm sure all of us have many painful stories of friends and mentors falling away. Out of all those I went to Scripture Union in school with, only two are still walking with the Lord. Recently, I've heard of an alarming number of Christians turning away from the faith. Some young, some old, some anonymous. Others, like the American pastor, Christian pastor

Joshua Harris, are very famous. But what about those that we love and look up to? Those we modeled our Christian faith upon, those who taught us how to be Christians. One older Christian who recently walked away from the faith said to his family, I was living a lie. I never really believed any of it.

Our church here in Crow Road may be full today, and by the grace of God may it long be that way, but our concern should be that none of us here today or in the future should turn our backs on Jesus.

It's not so important that we have many students in our church today. It's good, but it's not so important. What's important is that in 20 years' time, they are still walking faithfully with the Lord. Over the next four weeks, I want us to study together the anatomy of apostasy, the anatomy of apostasy. I want us to dissect what's at the root of the problem, how to deal ourselves with the personal fallout, and then how to relate to our friends who formerly called themselves Christians but have now renounced their faith in Jesus. This morning, I want us to turn to Joshua 24 to begin our examination of the anatomy of apostasy. Now, we know that Joshua was the successor of Moses. Moses led the people of Israel out of Egypt and to the borders of the promised land. Under Joshua, Israel began the conquest of the land of Canaan.

[2 : 45] Joshua's chapter 23 and 24 are his farewell speech to the Israelites. He was old. He was close to death. And these chapters really are Joshua's legacy. In verse 15 of Joshua 24, he says, If it is evil in your eyes to serve the Lord, choose this day who you will serve.

Choose this day who you will serve. As for me and my family, we will serve the Lord. The first element of the anatomy of apostasy I want us to explore together is how those who fall away in the faith often have never really chosen the Lord for themselves.

They have never really chosen the Lord for themselves. I want you to notice that in his closing speech, Joshua isn't speaking to the nations of the world.

He is speaking to the covenant people of God, the Israelites. In our context, he is speaking to the church. And by saying what he does, he is calling them all to make a personal choice of the Lord. Not to be carried along by family, friends, and community. But to make personal choice of following God for themselves. The majority of those, in my experience, who fall away from the faith came first as part of a group.

[4 : 18] Maybe they didn't personally follow, choose to follow Christ, but because for one reason or another their family or friends were coming to faith, they saw it as being the thing to do to profess faith in Christ also.

But in their heart of hearts, they had never personally chosen Jesus for themselves. There may be some among us this morning who are professing Christians because all our family and friends are professing Christians.

And there was an unconscious peer pressure that it was the right thing to do at the time. If you're in this category of having come to faith at the same time as a number of your family members and

friends, you are in particular danger of falling away.

And as a result of Joshua's words today, you must personally choose Christ for yourself so that the words of the hymn are true for you.

I have decided to follow Jesus. No turning back. Though no one else should join me, still I will follow. No turning back.

[5 : 37] Let's dissect Joshua's anatomy of apostasy in this chapter under three headings. Failing to experience grace, failing to choose God, and failing to put away idols.

It is good that we have many people in church every Sunday. But the big question is, are we here because we have personally chosen to be a disciple of Christ?

Or is there some other reason? The first reason we may fall away from our faith in Christ is that we fail to experience grace.

We fail to experience grace. The first 13 verses of this chapter are given over to Joshua's retelling of the story of the nation of Israel. It begins in the days pre-Abraham, when Abraham and his fathers were still serving other gods while they lived in modern-day Iraq, near the city of Basra. There follows the promises God made to Abraham, what is called the Abrahamic covenant. Abraham worshipped foreign gods until, in an act of sovereign grace, God brought him to know himself.

[6 : 54] And he made Abraham promises of people and land, not because Abraham deserved any of it, but because of God's supreme grace. Again, in an act of sovereign grace, God miraculously rescued the Israelites from their slavery in Egypt.

He lovingly provided for them in those long years in the wilderness until they arrived in this promised land of Canaan. When the Israelites arrived there, God gave all their enemies into their hands, and they possessed the land for themselves.

God says to them in verse 13, I gave you a land on which you had not labored and cities that you had not built, and you dwell in them. You eat the fruit of vineyards and olive orchards that you did not plant.

And it's all in the context of God's sovereign, loving, and undeserved grace. And in that context, he calls upon them in verse 14 to fear the Lord and serve Him in sincerity and faithfulness.

The grace of God to His people came first, then the obedience of His people. The salvation of God came first, then came the holiness of His people.

[8 : 10] Now, we follow exactly the same pattern as Christians. The sacrifice of Christ on the cross came first, then comes our obedience and response to Him.

Salvation first, holiness as a result. We do not work our way to salvation. Rather, Christ has come down to earn salvation for us. We gratefully respond to Him by living holy lives.

As Paul says in Ephesians 2.10, we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

And the Christian gospel, as we know, surely is grace from beginning to end. His salvation of us through the cross of Christ is all of Him.

Even the faith by which salvation becomes ours is His gift. It is entirely true what they say, there but for the grace of God go I. Jesus' blood is of infinite worth, more than enough to save a world of sinners.

[9 : 19] The problem comes when we fail to experience that grace toward us in Christ. The people to whom Joshua was speaking began to think that it was by their efforts that they won the land of Canaan.

And it was by the sweat of their brows they had made the land fertile and fruitful. Why serve the Lord if one thinks that He has done nothing for us and that we've done it all ourselves?

Many Christians who fall away have never really experienced the grace of God for themselves. For all that they spoke of the grace of God on the cross of Christ, they still were working under the assumption that they had to earn salvation by their hard work, their commitment, and their religious effort.

They got involved in every Christian society and university. They volunteered for every Christian mission. And they worked hard in the church.

But for all the wrong reasons, they were not responding in gratitude to God's salvation. They were trying to earn God's salvation.

[10 : 33] Others who fall away manifest their lack of experience of the grace of God by becoming legalistic.

They establish strict rules for everyone to follow. But all the time, the external rules they follow mask inner disorder.

They haven't experienced the grace of God for themselves and they're therefore incapable of extending that grace to others. One of my ministerial friends often says to me, beware of the guys in the black suits.

And in my experience, there's a lot of truth in what he says. The other aspect about failing to experience God's grace is that those who fall away forget that the grace of God reaches out to us in our sin.

And that the arms of our loving Father are open wide, waiting for us to return. Some Christians fall away because having committed some grievous sin or even just having spent some time in a spiritually lukewarm state, they think, God will not have me back now after what I've done.

[11 : 49] They don't understand that the grace of God is so all-embracing that it's enough to forgive the ugliest of sins and welcome home the prodigal who has been away from him for many years.

Do you experience the grace of God in the cross of Christ? If you hold the blood of Christ dear to your heart, recognizing that it was for you he died, how can you betray him by turning away from him?

If grace is that precious to you, you will not fall away. The grace of God to which you cling for salvation shall be the grace of God which shall sustain you through the whole of life.

So the first reason some fall away may be a failure to experience grace. Second, the second reason why some may fall away is a failure to choose God.

A failure to choose God. And what is one of the most powerful challenges to us in the whole Bible? Joshua says to the people, choose this day who you will serve.

[13 : 06] Now remember, Joshua's not speaking to the surrounding nations when he issues this challenge. He's speaking to Israel, the covenant community of God. By inference, therefore, he must have known that there were many in Israel who had not chosen to follow the Lord for themselves.

They were following God because, well, that's what Israelites do. It's a national thing. It's a cultural thing. Or they're following God because that's what their ancestors did.

It's a family thing. Or they were following God because that's what people in their villages did. It's a community thing. Culture and nationality, family and friends, four of the biggest reasons people think they are following God when in reality they have never chosen Him for themselves.

They've been carried along in a group and they've never examined themselves to see if they have the faith of their fathers and their friends in their hearts.

They've never really chosen Jesus for themselves. They've just gone with the flow of those around them. They go to church because their friends go to church. They've learned how to speak as Christians because they've listened to other Christians speaking.

[14 : 20] They act like Christians because they're following the crowd and no one ever likes to go against the flow. For all that, they have never chosen Jesus for themselves.

Our Sunday school classes are called JAMS, which stands for Jesus and me. When it comes to becoming a Christian, it is always just Jesus and me.

If you go for a walk in the countryside, you'll be familiar with a kissing gate. Only one person at a time can go through a kissing gate. In the same way, only one person at a time can become a Christian.

You can't enter into eternal life holding someone else's hand. It must be a choice you make as an individual. Your friend can't be there with you. You must go through that gate by yourself.

Trust me, you'll meet your Christian friend on the other side of that gate, but unless you yourself go through it and choose to follow Jesus for yourself, you cannot be saved.

[15 : 34] Being a Christian is a community experience. It must be. But becoming a Christian is first and foremost about Jesus and me. It's all about your personal choice of Jesus for yourself.

Now, as a thoroughgoing Calvinist, I believe that the Bible teaches that God's sovereign and gracious choice of us is ultimate and comes before our choice of Him.

But as a thoroughgoing Calvinist, I also believe that the Bible teaches that we are invited and commanded to choose God for ourselves and are accountable for our lack of personal response to

Him.

Joshua calls upon us to choose who we will serve. It isn't enough that we tag along with others who have chosen to serve God or that we were born into a family that's chosen to serve God.

It isn't enough that our nation is known as a Christian nation or that our culture is based upon Christian values. It isn't enough that we go to church or play our part in University Christian Union.

[16:46] It isn't enough that we are baptized and take communion. It isn't enough that we can talk the right talk and that our friends are all Christians. Christians, it's not enough for others to think that we are Christians and even that we ourselves think that we are Christians.

If we have not positively chosen to become disciples of Jesus for ourselves, if we haven't chosen God, then whatever else we might be, we are not Christians.

Now, I'm not saying that we can point to an hour or to a day when we had a conversion experience. Many of us can't. But what I'm saying is that we have made and are making a conscious decision of God over everything else.

There may be some who fall away who can point to a time when they became Christians. But there are many who fall away who can't because they never did.

God's sake and they never the word of grace to us today is this. It is never too late for you to choose for yourself to follow Christ.

[18:00] Even today, if you have not consciously decided to become a disciple of Jesus but have just tagged along with other Christians, God demands your choice. Perhaps you don't know how to choose Christ for yourself to become a conviction Christian, not just a cultural Christian.

Speak to me afterwards. I'll help you to make that choice for yourself but make it. Make it today lest you find yourself turning away from Christianity once and for all.

It's a challenge for all of us here today. Choose this day who you will follow. Now the third reason that some may fall away is that they fail to put away idols.

They fail to put away idols. Will we serve the Lord or will we serve idols? We can't serve both. God will be the Lord of all or He will be the Lord not at all.

Joshua in this verse challenges the people to be clear about their loyalties. Will they worship the gods Abraham worshipped before God called him to Himself? Will they follow the gods the people of Canaan worship or will they worship the Lord and Him alone?

[19:20] As we read down this chapter the people declare their single-minded loyalty to God and in verse 31 we read Israel served the Lord all the days of Joshua and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua and had known all the work the Lord did for Joshua.

But as we read through the following book of Judges we learn of how divided Israel became with its loyalties. They were unfaithful to God and they adopted the gods of the nations around them.

The nation of Israel turned away from God because it failed to put away its idols. If we fail to put away the idols in our lives when we choose to follow God they will come back to bite us.

Now by idols I'm not talking about statues made of wood and stone or religious sculptures or paintings on the wall. I'm referring to things which go far deeper. 400 years ago one of the famous Puritans Thomas Watson wrote there is no idol like self.

There is no idol like self. Christ and self cannot both sit on the throne of our hearts cannot come first in our lives it must be one or the other Christ or self.

[20:42] For the Christian who falls away the idol of self becomes far too dominant in their lives. It may be the idol of financial security that one needs to look after himself so career progression the acquisition of wealth and the increase of possessions dominate over one's loyalty to God.

It may be the idol of societal belonging that one needs to be just like the Joneses next door so the parenting of our children the money we spend on our houses the kind of car we drive that dominates one's faith in Christ.

Or it may be the idol of significance in relationship but to be significant to mean something one needs to be in a committed relationship so marrying someone settling down and having barons dominates over one's relationship to God.

Now all these desires are good in and of themselves which one of us doesn't want security belonging and to be loved but it's when we make these things a priority over our faith in Christ that trouble begins.

It's when we get these priorities that I showed in the children's talk all mixed up that's when trouble begins. The first commandment reads like this you shall have no other gods before me. When we

put other things before God we have made them into idols.

[22 : 04] The vast majority of Christians who fall away from their faith in Jesus Christ do so because they put something else before him in their lives. It rarely starts with the intellect very rarely.

Very few people turn away from the Christian faith because they think it lacks coherence. It starts with the affections always. It always starts with the affections what people put first in their lives. When our children were little they would squeeze into bed between me and Kathmer and before long they'd squeeze us out or me out actually. I could always predict which bed I'd go to sleep in but I could never predict which bed I'd wake up in.

And in the same way falling away from the faith is a process. These idols of ours get between us and God and over time they squeeze God out of our minds and our hearts.

It is very rarely an immediate instantaneous decision. During the process Christian friends watching on in love will warn us that we're in danger but we don't listen until finally the day comes when we cut our ties with the church and no longer call ourselves Christian.

[23 : 27] The idol of our lives chiefly the self squeezes God out. How many times have we seen that happening and felt helpless towards another Christian other than to warn them and to pray for them?

is there anyone here today who is walking down that process? The process always begins with something good.

The pursuit of belonging. The pursuit of security. The pursuit of love. The problem is that we don't look for these things in God but in the world around us.

In a non-Christian boyfriend. in a job we really shouldn't be doing. In reading stuff we shouldn't be reading. In pursuing a career we're putting before God.

The gospel offers us all these things to the full but we choose to go for the immediate gratification and now we're stuck in a downward spiral. Perhaps no one else knows we're stuck here but you do.

[24 : 37] You do. the answer isn't returning to our previous point. Choose this day who you will serve.

You may have chosen many years ago to follow Christ but since then idols have crept into bed between you and God and are starting to squeeze God out.

You're beginning to imagine what life would be like with all the restrictions that God places in your life. you've forgotten the cross. Go back to the beginning and choose Him again.

Go back to the cross and see the love of Christ for you there. Go back to the resurrection and see how Jesus has taken all your sins away and given you eternal life. In fact choosing God isn't a one-off decision for the Christian.

It's not. It's a whole life commitment for the Christian. For by significant times in our lives perhaps even daily we choose Him for ourselves again and again and again.

[25 : 51] Choose Him who first chose you. Choose Him who sent His Son to die for you. Choose Him in whom as you abide in Him He gives you life and life to the full.

If you are way far down that process of falling away from God, decide this day. Come to your senses like the prodigal son and choose Him again.

Put these idols away from your faith in Christ. It'll be hard for you, I do, but for the sake of your soul it must be done.

We close with a message of hope. The nation of Israel waxed and waned in its faithfulness to God as we saw from Vernon's reading. There were low points, but there were also high points.

Turning away from God is not necessarily final. Those who at present have turned their backs on God and are no longer calling themselves Christians may well come back.

[26 : 53] Our God is faithful even when we are faithless. They may like the prodigal son be in a far-off country at the moment, but be patient and be prayerful.

God waits with outstretched arms and a loving heart for them to return. Don't despair. God is still in control and He loves our backslidden friends an awful lot more than we do.

But yet the call to all of us here today is this, on this first Sunday of the year 2025. This is God's call to us all. Choose this day who you will serve.

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