

Throw It Away?

Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18 (NIV)

¹ Then Joshua assembled all the tribes of Israel at Shechem. He summoned the elders, leaders, judges and officials of Israel, and they presented themselves before God. ² Joshua said to all the people, "This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: ¹⁴ "Now fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your ancestors worshiped beyond the Euphrates River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. ¹⁵ But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD." ¹⁶ Then the people answered, "Far be it from us to forsake the LORD to serve other gods! ¹⁷ It was the LORD our God himself who brought us and our parents 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. ¹⁸ 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."

When something breaks and doesn't do what it's supposed to do, do you keep it and try to repair it or throw it away? When Wendy and I bought our first house, we discovered in the inspection that the over the range microwave didn't work. It was broke. We asked the sellers to throw it away and replace it, only to have the new one die on us about 3 years later. I remembered a microwave growing up that seemed to never break down. I asked around to see what microwave would last like that. I was consistently told that they don't build them to last anymore. Knowing that it's more expensive to repair our microwave than to replace it, when they break, we throw them away and go get a new cheap one from Walmart.

Throwing broken things away is nothing new. Archeologists uncover trash heaps from ancient civilizations still today. (Consider what people 3,000 years from now will think of us by looking at our garbage...) But we don't just throw out broken microwaves; we sometimes throw away relationships because they don't work for us and seem broken.

When a friend betrays your trust, tells others your faults and flaws without ever talking to you about them, lets you down by not being there for you when you asked them to, it's like they threw away our friendship and it hurts. Sometimes we're just sad, sad that they would do these things, leaving you more alone than ever. Maybe it makes you mad, mad that with all the time and energy that you've given to them, they seemingly cast it all away, spit on it. Mad to the point where you feel like lashing out, "Well, I'm not going to be friends with you anymore." And you throw them out of your life because you've deemed that this relationship is broken as it hurts you. You unfriend them on Facebook. You avoid the places where you might see them. You ghost their phone calls and texts. Are we tempted to do the same and throw away our relationship with God because it's broken and hurts us?

Joshua, the leader of the Israelites who was appointed by God after Moses died, brought all the people together to have them throw out some broken items. "Then Joshua assembled all the tribes of Israel at Shechem. He summoned the elders, leaders, judges and officials of Israel, and they presented themselves before God. Joshua said to all the people, 'This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: Now fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your ancestors worshiped beyond the Euphrates 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 ancestors served beyond the Euphrates, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living.'" (verses 1-2a, 14-15a) That phrase, "if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you," is more literally translated, "If it is evil in your eyes to serve the LORD." Was it evil in the eyes of the Israelites to keep serving the LORD?

Over the last 400+ years, the Israelites had been hurt by God. God allowed the Egyptians to make them slaves. He allowed Pharaoh to kill Israelite baby boys when they were born. When Moses came and asked Pharaoh to let the Israelites go, Pharaoh increased their workload and punished them severely when they didn't meet their quotas. At times, the Israelites were hurt when they had no idea where they would get food and water in the desert. They lost battles in taking over the Promised Land. They felt hurt by God, saw these actions as evil. Was their relationship with God broken because they were hurt by it?

God can and does do things that hurt us. He's all powerful but allows us to get sick, get cancer, COVID, other health defects and life-threatening illnesses. He allows a loved one to die when to us it seems preventable. He allows people to bully us, hurt us, and not just by unbelievers. God allows other Christians to sin against us, say something insensitive, something careless that doesn't take my feelings into account, make us feel inferior or second class, hurt us. God hurts us even more when he points out our sins, exposes our imperfections, tells us to deny ourselves. It hurts. It looks evil. Is this relationship broken? Do we need to take Joshua up on his offer and throw away our relationship with God and other Christians?

We know what Joshua decided to do. "As for me and my household, we will serve the LORD." (verse 15b) The people were right behind him. "Far be it from us to forsake the LORD to serve other gods!" (verse 16) Why the shift in mindset, even with being hurt? They remembered what made a Hallelujah. "It was the LORD our God himself who brought us and our parents 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." (verses 17-18) The Lord had done all these things to make a relationship with them. He provided the redemption, the price of his blood and his life to free them from their captivity to physical slavery and their spiritual slavery to sin. He is the powerful one who gave them all the victories that they had. When they had no food and water, it was the LORD, and only the LORD, who provided them with manna and quail and water. He protected them. He kept them safe. Forgetting all the hurt, they said there was no way would they throw away their relationship with God in favor of anything else.

Why cling to our relationship with God, even if he hurts us? Aren't we supposed to get rid of the things that hurt us? Not all hurt is bad or evil. When a parent scolds a child before they put their hand on a hot burner, it hurts the child's feelings to be yelled at, but it stops them from having the physical harm of burning their hand. When God tells us to deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow him, meaning that we are to deny our selfish desires and our sinful wants and instead focus on Christ, it hurts. But he does this so that we don't belong to sin and its chains of captivity. He wants us to live in the freedom of the new person that he has created us to be through baptism, that simple act of washing with water to cleanse us from all our sins and put on us instead all of Jesus' perfection.

When God does allow us to be hurt, he never wastes it. The Apostle Paul related to the Corinthian Christians how he had a thorn in his flesh that tormented him, hurt him. He pleaded with God to take it away. Yet, God's answer to him was, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." (2 Corinthians 12:9) Paul then recognized that this hurt was to keep him from trusting in himself and instead to trust in the all-powerful God to get him through. When he trusted in God and not himself through the pain, he was stronger for it. Now, he could help others get through pain with God as God had done for him.

God never enjoys watching us suffer or want to hurt us. Sometimes he gives us hurts so that our eyes are focused on what he has given us, that we keep our eyes fixed on Jesus and the victory that he has done for us, the victory over our sin, death itself, and the power of the devil. He wants us to long for what is better, for what he has in store for us, for heaven.

The hurt starts to be forgotten when we remember what God has done for us. Through baptism, God drowns our sinful nature with all its guilt every day. He then raises us as new people in Christ - holy, pure, without stain, wrinkle, or any blemish, heirs of heaven. We are no longer captives to sin; we've been redeemed by Christ's blood. Because we are baptized, each day is an opportunity to live our new lives for God and not ourselves. In the Lord's Supper, we receive Jesus' body and blood for that renewal of the one-sided covenant where God forgives our wickedness and remembers our sins no more. And we need it. We need it because the hurt of this life makes us want to throw away our relationship with God, but God uses these means draw us to him and renews us in his perfect image and strengthens our relationship with him.

This makes us cautious about throwing away relationships with other Christians. Yes, they are messy relationships because we are both new creations forgiven and perfected by Christ as well sinners fighting daily our sinful nature which only wants to do evil and cause hurt to ourselves and others. Where's the line when you throw out your relationships with Christians who hurt you? I don't know. But when these relationships keep us from Christ, keep us from gathering with our fellow Christians, keep us from hearing his Word, if they make us think that it's evil to serve the LORD, then throw them out. These are broken relationships.

Instead, cling to the relationship of the one who is always faithful, who always loves you, always protects you, even when you are hurt. Invest in your relationship with God and these messy relationships with our brothers and sisters in Christ. Serve one another as God has served you. We are going to keep our relationship with God and those who follow him. We say with Joshua, "As for me and my household, we will serve the LORD." (verse 15b) Amen.