

The Christian's Pledge of Allegiance

Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18 (NIV84)

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 forefathers worshiped beyond the 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 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." 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 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. 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."

Have you ever noticed that we have an American flag in our sanctuary? When I see it up here, it reminds me of how every earthly authority that exists has been established by God, regardless of whether or not the leaders are Christian. God is the one in control over all authority as Romans 13 says. So, when I come to worship, I come both as a citizen of this country and as a citizen of God's kingdom. I bring this up because I'm going to do something a little different today. Because every earthly authority exists only because God has established them, today in worship, I am going to pledge my allegiance to my country right now, and I invite anyone who desires to join with me. Don't feel obligated to do so, but this is what I'm going to do because I appreciate my country and the rights given to me to worship God freely. If you do so desire, stand now, and we will say the pledge of allegiance.

I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, and to the republic for which it stands, one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

I pledged allegiance to my national flag, but what about this flag on the other side of the sanctuary? This is the Christian flag. It's only been around for a little more than a hundred years. It was dreamed up by a Sunday School Superintendent, Charles Overton. In 1897 he asked his students what they thought a flag for Christianity would look like. They came up with this: white representing the universal color of peace, purity, and innocence; blue as the color of the unclouded sky symbolizing heaven, the home of the Christian as well as being a symbol for faith and truth; and a cross, the universal symbol of Christianity colored red to symbolize the blood that Jesus Christ shed to pay for our freedom from sin and eternal damnation.

Have you ever pledged to the Christian flag? (They actually do have a pledge for it, but, admittedly, I had never heard it before until I researched it.) In a way, we do a pledge of allegiance, not so much to a Christian flag, but to God himself. Whenever we have a new member confirmed here, I ask those standing, confessing their Christian faith, "Do you intend to continue steadfast in the teachings of the Bible and to endure all things, even death, rather than fall away from it?" The confirmands answer, "I do, and I ask God to help me." I ask a follow up question, "Do you intend faithfully to conform all your life to the teachings of God's Word, to be faithful in the use of the Word and sacrament, and in faith and action remain true to God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—as long as you live?" Again, the confirmands pledge to God, "I do, and I ask God to help me."

We are not the first Christians to pledge allegiance to God. That is exactly what Joshua called all the people of Israel - all the elders, all the leaders, all the judges, and all the officials - to do before God. Joshua first reminds them of what God had done for them. He goes back to the time of Abraham, some 600+ years before Joshua. He talks about how Abraham's father, Terah, had worshiped other gods, but then God called Abraham to follow him and led him to Canaan. God made Abraham into a great nation, the nation of the Israelites, and then he brought them up out of slavery from Egypt. Under Joshua, the Israelites had conquered the Amorites, Perizzites, Canaanites, Hittites, Girgashites, Hivites, and Jebusites. Yet God was the real reason for their victories. Joshua said just prior to our verses today, "You did not do it with your own sword and bow. So I [the LORD] gave you a land on which you did not toil and cities you did not build; and you live in them and eat from vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant." (verses 12b-13)

With this history in mind, Joshua calls the Israelites to pledge allegiance to God once again. "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." (verse 14) But he also gives them an out. "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." (verse

15a) Joshua leads the people with his own pledge of allegiance to God. “But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.” (verse 15b) Regardless of what you choose, I am letting you know up front what I am choosing. I pledge allegiance to the LORD – both me and my whole household.

The people have no hesitation in their pledge. They remember that God had brought them out of the land of slavery in Egypt with mighty miracles. God had protected them during those 40 years of wandering in the desert. The LORD had driven out all those nations before them as they conquered the Promised Land. They pledge allegiance to God. The people answered, “Far be it from us to forsake the LORD to serve other gods! ... We too will serve the LORD, because he is our God.” (verses 16 & 18b)

In the moment, I don’t know that any of them would have thought of a valid reason not renew their pledge of allegiance to serve the LORD. What could possibly be undesirable in serving the Lord after recalling all the great things that he had done for them? And when we are here at church, you are probably having a hard time thinking of any reason why you would not want to pledge allegiance to the LORD.

Then you find those moments when the idea of serving the LORD does seem undesirable to you. They come in your day to day living. Do I really have to change my life, my lifestyle? Do I really have to stick up for people I don’t even like? Do I really have to confront people on their sin? Do I really have to forgive that person after what they did to me? Do I really need to be in church every week? Can’t I plan on skipping a few services? Do I really have to be the odd one out with all of my friends? Can’t I just do what they are doing and not feel guilty about it?

How have you done with your Christian pledge of allegiance? Have you faithfully conformed all your life to the teachings of God’s Word? (I wish you wouldn’t use that word “all,” pastor.) No, I have not conformed all my life to the teachings of God’s Word. I have done some things well. I’m here, at church today, listening to God’s Word. I’m glad that God has empowered me to live for him. But in other ways, I know that I made choices that did not conform to God’s will for my life because on that day, for that moment, it was undesirable to me to serve the Lord. I did what I knew I shouldn’t do. I pledged to conform my whole life to God’s Word and his teaching, but I failed because I found that there were times when it was undesirable for me to serve the LORD.

I failed my pledge of allegiance to God. I don’t deserve to belong to him. I don’t deserve to be a part of his people. Who would accept someone like me who continually fails to make good on his pledges to God?

The Israelites failed their pledges to God. During the Exodus, they built a golden calf and worshiped that as God. 10 of the 12 spies who scouted the Promised Land said that there was no way that they would ever take that land, that God would not protect them or give them victory even though they had pledged to follow God’s lead, the same God who told them to take the Promised Land and that he would be with them as they did it. In the years to come after Joshua, during the time of the Judges, the Israelites made a habit of turning to other gods again and again, breaking their pledge to God over and over and suffering the consequences for it.

Even though the Israelites broke their pledge of allegiance to God, God did not break his pledge to them. He pledged to make Abraham’s descendants into a great nation. He did it. He promised to bring them up out of the land of slavery in Egypt. He did it. He pledged to bring Abraham’s descendants back to the Promised Land safely and to give it to them as an inheritance. Under Joshua, he did it.

God’s pledge did not stop there. He pledged to the world, to us, to bring all people out of slavery – not a literal state of slavery like the Israelites, but to bring us up out of a spiritual state of slavery. He pledged to free us from the slavery of our sins, a slavery that leads only to eternal death. He pledged to send an offspring of the woman to crush the serpent’s head in order to free us from this slavery. He made good on that pledge with Jesus. Because he was faithful to his pledge to us, we are freed from the slavery of our sin. This means that even as we do find times when it is undesirable to serve the LORD, when we do fail to conform all of our lives to the teachings of God’s Word, when we do break our pledge of allegiance to God, he still offers us forgiveness and freedom from the slavery of our sins because he has made good on his pledge to us.

We have not always kept our pledge of allegiance to God, but thanks be to him that he did not fail to keep his pledge to us, or to the Israelites. God’s Son brought us up out of the slavery of sin. In thankfulness to God’s faithfulness, we renew our pledges today, just like Joshua, just like the Israelites. He commands, “Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve.” (verse 15) We walk away from church today saying, “Far be it from us to forsake the LORD to serve other gods,” to find serving the LORD as something undesirable. Lord, empower us to serve you because you are our God, because you have kept your pledge to us.” Amen.