

## The Antithesis: A Challenge

In previous articles we have examined various aspects of the antithesis. In this concluding article on the subject, we present the antithesis as a challenge in the light of Joshua 24:14–16: “Now therefore fear the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and truth: and put away the gods which your fathers served on the other side of the flood, and in Egypt; and serve ye the LORD. And if it seem evil unto you to serve the LORD, choose you this day whom ye will serve; whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the flood, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land ye dwell: but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD. And the people answered and said, God forbid that we should forsake the LORD, to serve other gods.”

These words are part of Joshua’s farewell address to Israel. He had led Israel into Canaan, and under his leadership they had conquered most of the land. For many years Joshua had governed them, but now he is old and ready to die. Before he does, he gives them a parting charge and challenge. He reviews all of God’s wonderful works for them, and in the above passage confronts them with an antithetical choice. He does this because he knows that he will no longer be present to lead them, and he also knows the history of Israel’s many falls into sin. Thus in response to his challenge, he wants from Israel a promise that in their generations they will serve the Lord.

This challenge comes also to us. Our times and circumstances are obviously much different from those of Joshua and Israel. But the choice is the same, because the antithesis is the same, and the challenge is also the same, for it is a challenge of faith that comes to those who stand for the thesis. Particularly as covenant young people, you must take this challenge to heart.

Joshua presents to Israel a two-fold choice. On the one hand is Jehovah and his service. This name of God indicates that he is the sovereign God of heaven and earth, who has created all things and by his providence continues to uphold and govern them. This name of God is also his covenant name. It indicates that as the sovereign God, he is the God of his people, whom from eternity he has chosen according to his divine election, and with whom he has established his covenant. When we combine these two ideas, we understand that as the sovereign God, Jehovah causes all things to work together for the good of his covenant people, so that by his sovereign power he realizes and perfects his covenant in everlasting glory. Joshua in the preceding context has just reminded Israel that this truth is evident from their history. He has emphasized that Jehovah has given them the land of the covenant promised to them in Abraham’s days. They had not conquered the land by their own efforts, but Jehovah has given them the land of rest by driving out their enemies. Jehovah had been faithful to his covenant with his people.

On the other hand are idol gods. Joshua mentions two kinds of idols. Twice he mentions the gods “on the other side of the flood.” The reference is not to the great flood of Noah’s day, but to the “stream,” that is, the river Euphrates, where the people of God lived in Ur of the Chaldees before God called Abraham to leave and go to Canaan. We know that idol worship was prevalent at that time, usually in the form of household gods, and that it was often mixed with the worship of Jehovah. From the words of Joshua it seems that there was still some of this idolatry present in Israel, if not in reality, then in memory and therefore in possibility. The other kind of idol was the gods of the Amorites. The Amorites were a specific nation that inhabited Canaan, but are often mentioned as representative of all the Canaanites, as they are here. The reference is then to all the heathen gods of the nations that had been driven out of the land that Israel now occupied. The problem was that not all the nations had been completely driven out. There was still the influence of the heathen living next to Israel, and their idol gods were still a temptation and a threat to Israel.

Between these idols gods and Jehovah Israel must choose, according to Joshua. This was a free choice on the part of Israel. Free not in the sense that idols and Jehovah are equal alternatives. Free not in the sense that man out of his free will is able to choose either alternative. But free in the sense that the choice is a matter of the heart and mind. The choice is not a matter of external compulsion; no one is forced against his will to choose one or the other. This is clear from what Joshua says in verse 14, in which he tells Israel what choice they ought to make. But in verse 15 he immediately adds, “And if it seem evil unto you to serve Jehovah,” that is, “If you do not want to serve the true God,” then, says he, “Choose the type of idol you want to serve, either household gods or Canaanite gods.” As spiritual, rational, and moral beings, Israel faces the choice between obedience and rebellion regarding their relationship with God. Yet this choice is a matter of grace. As man is apart from Christ, his will is free to choose only the evil; he has neither ability nor willingness to choose Jehovah. It is only the grace of God in Christ, powerfully working in the elect sinner that makes the right choice possible.

The choice with which Joshua confronts Israel also faces us today. The choice takes a different form, but it is essentially the same. Jehovah is the same yesterday, today, and forever. But the idols are different, at least for us in the West. Instead of figures constructed from wood and stone, gold and silver, before which men bow down and to whom they give their allegiance and worship, we have the idols of money, success, popularity, power, fun, entertainment, sports, and more. Yet the basic question is still the same: “Whom will you serve?” The alternatives are also the same: Jehovah or idols, God or not God. And there are only two alternatives. Israel in their history had tried synthesis—a combination

of Jehovah and idols—but God had taught them by hard experience that such a third option does not exist. The choice is not a both/and, but an either/or proposition.

Young people, take note. Your parents and grandparents have for the most part made their life choice. They have chosen for Jehovah, the thesis, and have rejected idols, the antithesis. This is not to say that such choice is a one-time matter, for it is not. Every one of us must make the choice of the antithesis every day in many ways, for the temptation of idols is always present in today's world. But many of you, young people, are making this choice for the first time. A fundamental choice this is. Will you choose for Jehovah or for idols? The answer will determine many aspects of your lives—where you go to school, what your career will be, who your friends will be, whom you will marry, whether or not you will succumb to the many temptations the evil one throws at you, and more. What will you do?

Joshua in verse 14 makes clear what Israel's obligation is. He is God alone, not the idols of the heathen; he is the creator and sustainer of all things; he is Israel's salvation, who has given them the land of Canaan, the Old Testament picture of heaven. Israel had the typical salvation of the Old Testament, just as we have the finished reality through Christ. With Israel we are then called to fear Jehovah. This is not the fear of terror, but the fear of respect and awe, a fear that arises out of love. We are also called to serve him in sincerity, that is, not merely outwardly, in sacrifices and other rituals, but from our hearts and with our lives. For Israel this meant specifically the putting away of their idol gods. For us it means that the antithesis arises from our hearts and becomes manifest in our lives. And we must serve God in truth, that is, not according to an idol of our own conception or making about what God wants, but as he has revealed his expectations in the Scriptures.

The fact that Joshua immediately connects fearing God and serving him in sincerity and truth with the putting away of idols is significant. His point is that the one implies the other. This illustrates the point that the thesis and the antithesis do not exist merely side by side, but rather in an oppositional relationship in which the antithesis always seeks to destroy the thesis.

At the end of verse 15 Joshua answers his own challenge. He does not wait for anyone else's decision, but takes a strong stand. He says in effect, "It makes no difference what anyone else does; I will stand alone if need be, but as for me and my house, we will serve Jehovah." He says this not because he is insensitive to the thoughts of others, but because he does not answer to anyone but God. There is a lesson here, young people, and the application to you is so obvious that I need not spell it out. Joshua stands sharply stand unequivocally for the thesis regardless of what anyone else does.

Joshua also takes a covenant stand. He does not refer only to himself, but includes his house, that is, his covenant generations. As the head of his house, he determines that his entire household in their generations will serve Jehovah.

Joshua's individual response to his challenge is echoed collectively by the people of Israel in the strongest possible language. They say, "God forbid! It is not even a possibility that we will serve idol gods." They understood clearly that serving other gods would mean forsaking Jehovah. Surely not all Israel made this response, for within the nation was the two-fold seed of election and reprobation. And in Israel's subsequent history a large portion of the nation did exactly what they say here they will not do. Often we also stumble and fall, for we are so weak and imperfect; we do not live the antithesis as we should. Yet these words are the response of faith on the part of God's people, the elect seed of Israel.

By faith we also give the answer of Joshua and Israel, understanding and believing the truth of the antithesis. When the challenge comes to you, "Choose you this day whom you will serve," what will your answer be? By the power of grace and living out of the principle of the thesis, may it always be, "As for me and my house, we will serve Jehovah."