



## COURAGEOUS FAMILIES

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In the old movie *Annie Hall*, Woody Allen tells the story of these two elderly women having dinner at a mountain resort. One of them turned to the other and said, 'The food at this place is terrible.' The other woman looked back at her and said, 'Yeah. And such small portions.'

Woody Allen goes on to say, "That's how I feel about life: It's full of pain, misery and suffering – and it's all over much too quickly."

We've spent time the last few weeks looking at just how hard family life can be – the forces that tear families apart, the crisis circumstances that wreak havoc. And wouldn't you know it, we're already at our last week. Such small portions.

So I'd like to go out on a positive note and talk about what it takes to be a courageous family. Life does require courage, because if you stop and think about it very long, it can get depressing to realize how many ways families can be devastated. Two weeks ago I mentioned my friend who was struggling with his second bout of leukemia. Last Sunday he passed away, leaving a wife and three daughters behind whose lives will never be the same. You just never know what's coming at you around the bend.

There's a story in the Old Testament about Joshua. Joshua had been leading the Israelites since Moses died, taking them into the promised land, fighting the battle of Jericho and helping them get established. He's nearing the end of his life, and he's concerned about the future of the families of Israel. He's not sure what's coming, but he wants them to be prepared.

So he calls together all the leaders of the different tribes for a big meeting. And he begins to recount for them all the different things God has done for Israel since the time of Abraham, the miracles he's done and the battles he's fought. And as he is summarizing his message to them, he concludes with this paragraph:

### **Joshua 24:14-15**

*"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. 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.”*

At the beginning of his career, the Lord told Joshua over and over again to be strong and courageous. Now, as his life is winding down, he renews his own commitment to be courageous and encourages Israel to live the same way.

Joshua doesn't directly come out and TELL the people to have courage – he tells them to make a choice. As I see it, making choices does take courage because it requires us to decide something and act on it, which will have repercussions. Choices bring consequences. In this case, the choice takes FAMILY courage, because it is a decision Joshua is asking whole families to make together.

What do I mean by courage? It's really the choice to act in the face of fear. Rather than withdraw in the face of difficult or painful circumstances, courage says you will move forward anyway. It doesn't mean you aren't afraid – you just don't let the fear stop you.

Have you known some courageous families? I sure have. Sometimes I have watched them dealing with heartache such as an accident or a completely rebellious teenager. I see them and go, “I don't know how they do it. I'd fall apart.” At other times I've observed courageous families who have decided to do something remarkable together. I just received a letter in the mail from a family that has decided to pick up and move to Brazil to work with street orphans in Rio. That's brave – leaving your middle class jobs and heading for a foreign country with the kids.

How do you get to be like that? I want our family to have that attitude toward decisions we face, the attitude that says “This is going to be risky, but we can do it.”

Oswald Chambers once wrote, “Faith is the heroic effort of your life; you fling yourself in reckless confidence on God.” That's the kind of courage we're talking about – a reckless confidence in God that chooses to trust him instead of giving way to fear.

Joshua was asking the people for a single decision, but as we break it down, we can find at least five ways that Joshua's challenge called for courage. The same principles that were at work in this story hold true for families today as well.

The first thing I note about what Joshua is saying is that it takes a courageous family to:

**Choose a path over pressure.**

Look again at what Joshua told the people:

*Throw away the gods your forefathers worshiped beyond the 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 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.”*

Joshua put before the people the options of following God or not following him. As he pointed out to them, there were plenty of reasons for not choosing God. For one thing, their ancestors had worshipped other gods, so their **personal history** and heritage would make them inclined to go a different direction. What’s more, the **surrounding culture** pulled them in other directions. Joshua mentioned the gods of the Amorites who lived alongside the Israelites. Worshipping God in a land that celebrated many gods wasn’t going to be naturally accepted.

Finally, there was **peer pressure** to contend with. Not all the Israelites were going to take this religion stuff so seriously. Joshua realized he had to make the decision for his own family and not look to his community to set the example.

All three of those pressures work against us today when we’re trying to make the right decisions for our family. We may find that our personal history gets in the way. We’ve done things in the past that make us feel like we can’t change. Or we get attached to old habits and don’t really want to give them up to choose something better. One guy I know who was trying to break an addiction said it was like saying goodbye to an old friend and there was a certain amount of grieving involved, even though he knew it was the right decision. That takes courage.

Whatever your past, God invites you to put it behind you and not let it determine the shape of who you become. You can choose a better path independent of where you’ve walked before. It takes us right back to two of my favorite verses in Isaiah that you’ve heard me talk about before:

**Isaiah 43:18-19**

*Forget the former things;*

*do not dwell on the past.*

*See, I am doing a new thing!*

*Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?*

*I am making a way in the desert*

*and streams in the wasteland.*

Just like our personal history doesn’t always help us make good choices, our culture doesn’t give much support to being a healthy family, let alone being a healthy Christian family. There was a time when it was more supportive, even of basic decisions like going to church. Fifty years ago, there were blue laws on the books that kept businesses closed on Sunday, making church pretty attractive one day a week if you wanted any kind of social life. Even when I was growing up, it was very rare for kids sports to be on a Sunday. But now, every conceivable family activity option competes with church for your attention on Sunday mornings. Morally it’s the same way. You’re on your own if you want to instill good moral values in your kids, because society isn’t interested in backing you up.

There's no sense complaining about it – that's just the way life is now. You can argue whether or not our culture is actually working against being a Christian family, but it certainly isn't doing anything to support the idea.

We face the peer pressure as well in the form of friendships. When your peers, the people that you know and care about are making different decisions, it's hard to stay on the track you want to follow. It's easy to be pulled another direction when it is your friends who are going that way.

Joshua stood in the face of all that and said, “Do what you want. As for me and my family, this is where we stand. We're choosing to get in line with God.”

He chose a path over pressure. He determined the goal and wouldn't be swayed by what was going on around him.

Have you identified a path for your family? What steps are you taking to get on it? It could be as simple as setting parameters for the movies you watch and your choices of entertainment. It could be the choice to begin praying together as a family, or working to have kinder talk to each other. It is hard for families to be active instead of reactive, to intentionally choose a path and stick to it. But that is a key for becoming a family of courage.

The second principle Joshua's challenge brings to light is that it takes a courageous family to

### **Choose truth over deception.**

We've already discussed the family history aspect of the other gods Joshua thought Israel might choose to follow. Their forefathers had worshipped them, giving them the weight of heritage to pressure families to continue to show allegiance to them.

But the fact remained that they really weren't even authentic gods. They were idols. Jeremiah gave a great description of them.

### **Jeremiah 10:2-5,10**

*This is what the LORD says: “Do not learn the ways of the nations or be terrified by signs in the sky, though the nations are terrified by them. For the customs of the peoples are worthless; they cut a tree out of the forest, and a craftsman shapes it with his chisel. They adorn it with silver and gold; they fasten it with hammer and nails so it will not totter.*

*“Like a scarecrow in a melon patch, their idols cannot speak; they must be carried because they cannot walk. Do not fear them; they can do no harm nor can they do any good.*

And then he said this:

*“But the LORD is the true God; he is the living God, the eternal King.”*

People were investing themselves in belief systems that were based on nothing but man-made objects. It was all a hoax compared to the living God who had proven his reality over and over again to Israel. When Joshua was in front of the people, he appealed to the truth of God.

**Joshua 23:14-15**

*You know with all your heart and soul that not one of all the good promises the LORD your God gave you has failed. Every promise has been fulfilled; not one has failed.*

For the Israelites, choosing God didn't just mean breaking with family tradition of worshipping other gods – it meant exchanging a lie for the truth. It meant giving up a pretend charade for the real thing, a God who didn't need to worry about being exposed as a fraud.

Most of us here don't have too many wooden idols on the mantle at home. In other cultures, maybe, but for the majority here, we don't really relate to that issue. But when you frame it as a matter of choosing truth over deception, we understand it very well, because many families struggle with embracing the truth. Being honest with each other is hard work.

It was Frederick Buechner who said, “A family is only as sick as its secrets.” We fear the truth and it takes courage to overcome that. But we need to overcome it, because the long term health of our family depends on it.

I knew a girl in high school who would often make these blunt, unkind comments. But if anybody said something to her about it, her response was always, “The truth hurts.” Years later, I learned that from early childhood, her stepfather had abused her, and it had been this terrible family secret. The truth did hurt, and they never really dealt with it, and the unresolved wounds from that secret carried into her adult life. Her ability to have a healthy relationship suffered permanent damage.

We can be living with deception and not even know it. Pete Scazerro, who is a pastor and the author of *The Emotionally Healthy Church*, tells of a time in his marriage when he was extremely busy with ministry. One day, his wife announced to him that she couldn't take it anymore. He either needed to cut back his workload or she was going to leave him.

That's not the proper, polite thing for a pastor's wife to say. But it was exactly the right thing for her to say. She couldn't go on pretending anymore that everything was fine. She couldn't fake it. And Pete Scazerro says that was a turning point toward real health in both their marriage and their ministry. That's what it took to break the cycle.

Anytime we pretend we're okay when we're not, we're not choosing the truth. Joshua challenges us to call things the way they really are. If there's some sin you're hiding from your spouse, you need to get it out on the table. If you're hurting inside but pretending everything's great, you need to find a safe way to be real. The writer of Proverbs said, "keep lies and falsehood far from me." We can ask God to give us the courage to choose truth over deception. It will make a world of difference in your family's future.

The next principle I see in Joshua's call is that it takes courageous families to

### **Choose action over inaction.**

I take this from Joshua's words in the middle of the verse, where he says

*Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve.*

Joshua was saying to the people, "Look – you can't be indecisive here. Yes or no. Black or white. Make up your minds and do it now."

That really runs contrary to my nature. I don't like making snap judgments. I like to analyze things almost to the point where there's no decision anymore because it is too late. I got locked in that mode for a couple years as we considered whether or not to plant a church. I had the "paralysis of analysis" where I couldn't bring myself to choose, and my indecision was starting to take a toll on the family.

There are two aspects that make a choice like that difficult: One is that to choose a path means to give up the possibility of a different one. Choosing is a commitment that eliminates certain other possibilities. A second aspect that makes it difficult is that to choose a path means risking failure. It could be a mistake.

What helped me finally break out of my indecision was that the choice was worth the risk of failing. Even if I made a mistake by choosing, if nobody showed up when we opened our doors or if it all fell apart in a year, what better way to waste my life than on something close to God's heart. If you're going to be risky, take a risk on something eternal

Are you sensing that God is putting a decision on the table in front of your family? Is he wanting you to change the way you treat each other? Is he asking you to take on some assignment? Is he asking you to reprioritize your family budget or time?

There is no point in delaying the choice of whether or not to follow God, whatever it is he is asking you to do. Joshua says to choose this day. Make today the moment of decision. Face the fear of commitment, and be a family of courage, and an individual of courage.

### **Choose togetherness over isolation.**

When Joshua made his choice he didn't make it alone:

*But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.*

It could be that he made it on behalf of his whole family. The point is that he wasn't going to walk down the road on his own – he was choosing to head that direction together with the rest of his household.

There's a song that says, "People make mistakes thinking they're alone." We get into trouble when we operate as if our decisions only affect us. Choices that impact the family need to include the family. The process of deciding should demonstrate respect for the opinions and feelings of others.

Sometimes that's not easy. My brother-in-law gave me a good example of that. He works in pharmaceutical sales, and he's always been very driven and motivated. In his first pharmaceutical job interview, the interviewer asked him, "What are your goals?" Without hesitation he responded, "In five years I want your job and in ten years I want your boss's job." He has always been on a career path to advance as far as possible in the company.

About 3 years ago, his dream job opened up in Phoenix. After several rounds of interviews, the company execs told him that he was the man they wanted for the job. He was ecstatic. It was everything he had been working for.

But when he got home, he was met by his oldest daughter. She reminded him in no uncertain terms that he had promised her he would never change jobs that would require her to move during her senior year, and she was not going to let him forget.

So he went back to the company and told them he couldn't take the job and explained why. It tore him up, but he knew it was the right thing, because this wasn't just his decision – it was a family decision.

The next day the company came back and said they could wait until she graduated, so he ended up with the dream job anyway. It was a powerful demonstration to his kids of his commitment to them AND of God's desire to honor our choices when we make them with integrity.

Paul wrote to the Romans,

**Romans 12:10**

*Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves.*

By including one another in our decision making process, we are saying "I value you. What you think matters to me." Sometimes, communicating that love is the most important piece of the decision.

There is one final principle that stands out in Joshua's challenge. It takes a courageous family to

**Choose full-on over halfway.**

Look again at the beginning of the verse:

*Now fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness.*

It wasn't just a choice to fear the Lord – it was also to serve him with all faithfulness. “All faithfulness” could be translated “completely” or “whole-heartedly” or “with total integrity”. Joshua didn't leave open the option of just being a “sort-of” follower. It's an all-or-nothing proposition.

When we studied the life of Gideon a few weeks ago, we said that the real battle was for his heart, and that's true here as well. God doesn't want us to halfway commit to him – he wants us to choose to be fully on board.

That's the center of Joshua's challenge to families: Love God with your whole heart. Don't sit on the sidelines anymore, but choose to follow him completely, together.

We're called to be courageous, not just for the sake of being strong, but because God demonstrated courage himself within the family of the Trinity. God the Father courageously chose to send his Son into the world in spite of the risk that he would be rejected. God the Son courageously chose to go to the cross, to risk separation from his Father in order to bring us into his family. There was no hesitation or halfway dabbling. He was fully committed to us and asks us to in turn show the courage to commit fully to him.

We've looked at a lot of different choices families have to make this morning, and I don't expect you to memorize the list. But I would encourage you to look it over and pick one to focus on for your family this week. What are you needing to choose?

Do you have a path you want to follow for your family, or are the pressures of life just shaping you as you move along? Do you know who you want to be as a family?

Maybe you have some truth telling to do. Are there secrets that are eating away at the health of your family? Have the courage to bring whatever it is out in the open where the healing can begin.

Have you been waiting to make a decision about God? Today's the day. There's no reason to hesitate. Take the risk of responding to God and being a family of action instead of inaction.

Are you including each other in your decisions? Maybe you've felt like someone else in your family is not letting you in, and you need to talk with them. Choose togetherness over isolation.

And how would you evaluate your current choices for God? Are they half way or are you fully on board with him?