

Choose To Love and Serve God

Lesson 13: December 9, 2018

Bible Background • EXODUS 20:1–11; JOSHUA 24

Printed Text • JOSHUA 24:1–3, 13–15, 21–24 | Devotional Reading • PSALM 81

At critical junctures in life, people are forced to make life-changing decisions. How do they decide which path to take? When challenged by Joshua to serve God or other gods, the Israelites definitively chose to love and serve God.

Words You Should Know

- A. Sanctuary miqdash (Heb.)—A place set apart for worship.
- B. Sincerity tamim (Heb.)—Suggests fullness, completeness, integrity or being without blemish or spot.

Aim for Change

At critical junctures in life, people are forced to make life-changing decisions. How do they decide which path to take? When challenged by Joshua to serve God or other gods, the Israelites definitively chose to love and serve God.

In Focus

Bill sighed as he saw his supervisor approaching with a stack of files. He was hoping to leave work on time; but this was the end of the fiscal year, which meant crunch time at his accounting firm. For the next four weeks, Bill knew he would be working longer than- usual hours and wouldn't get to do what he really loved: acting.

He came alive whenever he performed on stage or before the cameras, even if he was just a face in a crowd scene or had a single line in a TV commercial. Making a living as an actor, however, required constant effort offstage: updating his demo reel and photos; finding casting notices; going to auditions; and attending acting classes when he could spare the money and the time. Work at the accounting firm was steady, but he found it harder to focus on numbers when he wanted to be in rehearsal. Once again, Bill thought about concentrating full time on acting. The fear of being broke always made him push that thought aside, but today it didn't.

He remembered the first time his mother saw him act, in a church production of *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*. He was 12. Mom was in the front row, smiling at his every word. When it was over, she told him, "Bill, you have a gift from God. It pleases me so to see you use it." He knew she would not be happy to see him behind a desk going through the motions instead of using the talents God gave him to the fullest.

Can we do our best for God if we put our energy into things God has not called us to do?

Keep in Mind

"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" (Joshua 24:15, KJV).

Focal Verses

KJV

Joshua 24:1 And Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and called for the elders of Israel, and for their heads, and for their judges, and for their officers; and they presented themselves before God.

2 And Joshua said unto all the people, Thus saith the LORD God of Israel, Your fathers dwelt on the other side of the flood in old time, even Terah, the father of Abraham, and the father of Nachor: and they served other gods.

3 And I took your father Abraham from the other side of the flood, and led him throughout all the land of Canaan, and multiplied his seed, and gave him Isaac.

13 And I have given you a land for which ye did not labour, and cities which ye built not, and ye dwell in them; of the vineyards and oliveyards which ye planted not do ye eat.

14 Now therefore fear the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in 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.

15 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.

21 And the people said unto Joshua, Nay; but we will serve the LORD.

22 And Joshua said unto the people, Ye are witnesses against yourselves that ye have chosen you the LORD, to serve him. And they said, We are witnesses.

23 Now therefore put away, said he, the strange gods which are among you, and incline your heart unto the LORD God of Israel.

24 And the people said unto Joshua, The LORD our God will we serve, and his voice will we obey.

NLT

Joshua 24:1 Then Joshua summoned all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, including their elders, leaders, judges, and officers. So they came and presented themselves to God.

2 Joshua said to the people, "This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: Long ago your ancestors, including Terah, the father of Abraham and Nahor, lived beyond the Euphrates River, and they worshiped other gods.

3 But I took your ancestor Abraham from the land beyond the Euphrates and led him into the land of Canaan. I gave him many descendants through his son Isaac.

13 I gave you land you had not worked on, and I gave you towns you did not build—the towns where you are now living. I gave you vineyards and olive groves for food, though you did not plant them.

14 So fear the LORD and serve him wholeheartedly. Put away forever the idols your ancestors worshiped when they lived beyond the Euphrates River and in Egypt. Serve the LORD alone.

15 But if you refuse to serve the LORD, then choose today whom you will serve. Would you prefer the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates? Or will it be the gods of the Amorites in whose land you now live? But as for me and my family, we will serve the LORD.

21 But the people answered Joshua, "No, we will serve the LORD!"

22 "You are a witness to your own decision," Joshua said. "You have chosen to serve the LORD." "Yes," they replied, "we are witnesses to what we have said."

23 "All right then," Joshua said, "destroy the idols among you, and turn your hearts to the LORD, the God of Israel."

24 The people said to Joshua, "We will serve the LORD our God. We will obey him alone."

People, Places, and Times

Shechem. The name means “shoulder or back.” Shechem is both a district and a city in the hill country of Ephraim in northern Palestine. Shechem was the first capital of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Rehoboam, successor to King Solomon, went to Shechem to be crowned king over all of Israel. Samaria eventually became the permanent capital of the Northern Kingdom. It was at Shechem that Jesus visited with the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s Well.

Idol. A graven image or representation of a god or goddess. In the context of the Bible, idolatry or worshiping idols is the great departure from God’s will that opens the door for all other sins; it is breaking the first commandment (Exodus 20:3–4). The Israelites throughout Scripture give into temptation to worship the gods of the nations around them that represent fertility, fruitfulness, weather, power, wealth, and other natural forces. For the Christian, an idol can be anything in our lives that is given more trust and attention than God.

Background

The ancient Israelites’ journey across the Jordan River into the promised land of Canaan is chronicled in the book of Joshua. As directed by God, Joshua provided guidance to the twelve tribes during this critical time in their history. Arrival in Canaan is an important moment in their history because this is the land God promised to their ancestors (Genesis, Chapters 12–50). The conquest of this land occurred after the Israelites were attacked; they had to fight for what they knew God promised them generations ago. The land was divided among the tribes, and Joshua called two national assemblies. The setting of the assembly recorded in today’s passage was Shechem, the heart of the Promised Land. This historically significant city was the prime setting for Joshua to lead a covenant ceremony among the Israelites. During the ceremony, Joshua stood as a prophet reminding them of God’s promise and provision. The Israelites voluntarily chose to take a vow of personal piety by turning their backs to idols and foreign gods. They made personal commitments to love and serve the God of Israel.

What are examples of modern idols or false gods we put before God?

At a Glance and In Depth

At-A-Glance

1. Remembering God’s Promise (Joshua 24:1–3)
2. Recognizing God’s Provision (vv. 13–15)
3. Reaffirming Our Piety (vv. 21–24)

In Depth

1. Remembering God’s Promise (Joshua 24:1–3)

Joshua assembles the twelve tribes and their governing officials before God. Joshua has already built an altar and engaged in a covenant ceremony in Shechem (Joshua 8:30–35). Shechem functions as a sanctuary for the ancient Israelite people. The prophet prepares the Israelites to engage corporately in a vow renewal ceremony by first reminding them of God’s initial promise to multiply Abraham’s offspring (Genesis 12:1–3).

Abraham was worshiping idols before God revealed Himself to Abraham as the true God. Yet after this encounter the descendants of Abraham chose again to turn back to idols. This choice had a negative effect on their descendants’ future. The distraction of foreign gods delayed their possession of God’s promise. Joshua reminds the people assembled in Shechem how a bad decision by their ancestors affected the history of their people.

How have distractions delayed the fulfillment of God’s promises in your life?

2. Recognizing God's Provision (vv. 13–15)

We learn God's *promises* always come with God's provision. God not only gave the Israelites the Canaanite land as promised, but also provided already-built towns and fruit-bearing plants. God ensured their basic food and shelter needs were met in Canaan prior to their arrival.

Verse 13 shows us an example of God's unconditional love and generosity despite ourselves. God did not default on the promise, because the Israelites turned to serve other gods. The Creator's back is never turned on us. Instead, God loves us through our wrong decisions and always keeps promises.

Thankfully, God does what He promises! After recognizing God's provision, Joshua challenges the Israelites to make a necessary decision. The prophet questions to whom they will offer their sincere and faithful worship. Ultimately, this covenant renewal ceremony is an opportunity to correct the wrong decisions of their ancestors. Joshua takes a stand and declares his household will break the family tradition and serve the Lord.

In your experience, how have you been challenged to turn away from idols and toward God?

3. Reaffirming Our Piety (vv. 21–24)

In response to God's promise and provision, the Israelites must decide if they will either continue serving idols or wholeheartedly serve God. The people respond to Joshua's challenge by publicly committing to serve the Lord. Making this public declaration with other believers is important for two reasons. First, this nation voluntarily chooses God. They are not forced to enter into relationship with God and neither are we. We must resist the temptation of idols and commit to serving God daily. Second, witnessing others reaffirm the vow creates a sense of accountability. We cannot live out our faith on our own. We ought to surround ourselves with believers, who share similar commitments. After reaffirming their vow to God, the Israelites are encouraged to repent by Joshua. They had to turn away from their idols completely. We cannot wholeheartedly serve God if our practices are to serve the world or serve ourselves. Our heart and actions must be in alignment with God when renewing our vows.

How does this covenant ceremony relate or compare to modern-day renewal ceremonies (wedding vows, the Lord's Supper)?

Search the Scriptures

1. Why do you think the Scripture reflects on the past traditions and choices of the Israelites' ancestors (Joshua 24:2, 14–15)? How might their family heritage shape the decision they must make about their faith at Shechem?
2. What do the Israelites have to do when they decide to follow God (v. 23)?

Discuss the Meaning

1. What are some examples of modern-day idols that people place before God?
2. How might reaffirming our commitment to God among others help us to stay committed?

Lesson in Our Society and Make it Happen

Liberating Lesson

It might be time to renew our vow to love and serve God considering the political climate in America, the growing tensions among nations around the world, and the numerous acts of injustice faced by black and brown people daily in our communities. This is not a reference to just any God, but the God of justice, who sides with the oppressed. As we incline our ear to the heart of the Lord, we should pay close attention to how God is calling us to serve oppressed people. We are called to stand up against injustice to ensure that all of God's people have access to His promises.

Application for Activation

While work, family, hobbies, relationships, and other commitments require our time, nothing should be prioritized before God. Spending excessive amounts of time watching television, working extra hours, and traveling can turn our attention away from God. Each of these commitments can become idols. One way to indicate which distractions prevent us from loving and serving God with our whole heart is to take a personal inventory of how we use our time. Make a schedule of how your time is spent in a typical week. How much time is devoted to loving and serving God? Is your time well-balanced?

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light On The Text

Joshua 24:1–3, 13–15, 21–24

Israel has conquered all the lands as the Lord promised. Israel is now settled, for “the Lord had given rest unto Israel from all their enemies round about” (from Joshua 23:1). A few years later, some suggest about 25 to 30 years after Israel entered the land, Joshua is now almost 110 years old (13:1; 24:29). He knows his life and leadership will soon end. He gathers all the tribes of Israel to address them. He reminds them of all that the Lord has done for them and charges them to maintain a good relationship with Yahweh by keeping “all that is written in the book of the law of Moses, that ye turn not aside therefrom to the right hand or to the left” (from 23:6). This is the first of two such gatherings Joshua calls before he dies.

24:1 And Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and called for the elders of Israel, and for their heads, and for their judges, and for their officers; and they presented themselves before God. 2 And Joshua said unto all the people Thus saith the LORD God of Israel, Your fathers dwelt on the other side of the flood in old time, even Terah, the father of Abraham, and the father of Nachor: and they served other gods. 3 And I took your father Abraham from the other side of the flood, and led him throughout all the land of Canaan, and multiplied his seed, and gave him Isaac.

Some scholars suggest that the gathering in chapter 24 is a continuation of the gathering in chapter 23. While the location of the gathering of chapter 23 is not mentioned, Shechem is mentioned as the place for the gathering of chapter 24. Shechem is an appropriate place for this solemn gathering considering the patriarchal tradition. Shechem is an ancient city. Abraham built an altar at Shechem when he arrived in Canaan (Genesis 12:6–7); Jacob bought a piece of ground and built an altar for the Lord here (Genesis 33:18–20; cf. Joshua 24:32). Shechem is one of the cities consecrated as a city of refuge for anyone who mistakenly kills another (20:7–9; 21:21). For all these reasons, Shechem is a sacred place for such an important meeting.

The word for “to gather” is the Hebrew verb ‘asaph (aw-SAF) and that is “to assemble, to bring together.” In this case Joshua is summoning them for an important occasion. Joshua summons all the tribes of Israel with her elders, heads, judges, and officers to this sacred site. The clause, “and they presented themselves before God,” seems to suggest that God initiated the assembly through a divine revelation to Joshua.

From verse 2 to 13 is Joshua’s address, which details the historical redemptive acts of God for Israel. Speaking on God’s behalf (“thus says the Lord,” v. 2), Joshua summarizes the story of Israel from the time of Abraham to the very point of their existence, including how the Lord has been with them providentially in all situations, and how He has loved and blessed them unconditionally.

13 And I have given you a land for which ye did not labour, and cities which ye built not, and ye dwell in them; of the vineyards and oliveyards which ye planted not do ye eat.

This is the conclusion of Joshua’s summary of Israel’s history up to the point of the address. Joshua is making a statement about what the Israelites are about to enter. God has given the land to the Israelites and taken it from the people of Canaan because God promised it to Abraham. The people of Israel were provided for by the providence of God; they could not claim their success based on their own efforts. God was giving them land, cities, and resources, abundantly providing for the Israelites as they entered into the place that God had called them. In this case, because God gave the vision, God also supplied the provision for the people God had liberated from bondage.

It would be misguided to interpret this Scripture as God’s authorization for colonialism and displacement of people in our modern world. God who was ruler of the earth itself had decided to plant Israel in the land of Canaan and therefore made complete provision for Israel in the land. A helpful rendering of this verse highlights that the Israelites were about to receive a promised land that was not built by their own work. No human being exists in autonomy or is entirely self-made, nor is any nation. We are all indebted to the peoples who have gone before us—and ultimately God who created and owns everything—for anything we receive.

14 Now therefore fear the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in 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.

In verses 2–13, Joshua serves as God’s prophetic spokesman, now he begins his final personal exhortation to the Children of Israel. That is, in view of the Lord’s acts in history, Israel is to maintain a good and God-fearing relationship with Yahweh.

First, they are to fear the Lord—to have an attitude of reverence, respect, and honor toward God as the Hebrew word *yare’* (yah- RAY) implies. It is in this sense that the word “fear” is used here; in contrast to being afraid of the Lord, as if God were a terror or cruel judge waiting to pounce on His subject for any mistake or wrongdoing. The fear of the Lord is an attitude of awe produced by the majesty, love, and goodness of God shown to His people. The Bible speaks often of the fear of God (Deuteronomy 4:10; 6:13, 24; Psalm 130:4). Proverbs says that fear of the Lord is the beginning or foundation of wisdom and knowledge (1:7; 9:10).

Second, Israel is to serve the Lord in sincerity and in truth. To serve (Heb. 'abad, aw-VAHD) the Lord means to worship Him. The word is elsewhere translated "to work or labor." Worshiping God is not just singing praises or listening to sermons; it is doing the work of loving our neighbors and caring for them. The word for sincerity (Heb. tamim, taw-MEEM) also suggests "fullness, complete, integrity or without blemish or spot." This is the word used to describe an acceptable offering to God. The word truth (Heb. 'emet, EH-met) elsewhere means "sureness or faithfulness." To worship the Lord thus, is the only way to serve Him. It should be devoid of hypocrisy and falsehood, for God hates such flaws (Proverbs 6:17, 19). Jesus tells the woman at the well in Samaria that "true worshipers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth" (from John 4:23). In his response to the woman's argument that their forefathers worshiped on the mountains of Samaria (John 4:20, i.e., in Shechem), Jesus alludes to what Joshua declares here to the people of Israel. Worshiping God sincerely and faithfully is an outgrowth of a heart that is in awe of Him. It is a heart that serves Him completely with no reservation.

Such sincere and unreserved service of the Lord is to be exclusive and has no room for other gods. Therefore, the people are to "put away the gods which your fathers served" (v. 2). Jacob made the same demand on his household (Genesis 35:2); Samuel also called on all of Israel to "put away the strange gods and Ashtaroth from among you, and prepare your hearts unto the LORD, and serve him only" (from 1 Samuel 7:3). The gods from whom the Israelites are to disassociate themselves include not only those beyond the Euphrates that Abraham had worshiped ("the other side of the flood"), but also the gods of Egypt.

This indicates that Israel served the gods of Egypt while they were there. Egypt is identified earlier in this chapter (vv. 2–13) as the place where the people cried out to God and were delivered, giving us a general sense that Israel was innocent while they lived in Egypt. However, this verse, with other Old Testament passages, presents a different picture of the situation. For example, later prophets recount how Israel played the harlot, a common metaphor for idolatry, while in Egypt (Ezekiel 20:7; 23:3–8). The making and worship of the molten calf in the Sinai desert is an indication that the Israelites were used to worshiping such gods, like the Egyptians' gods (Exodus 32). But Joshua calls on them to put away these other gods, and serve only the Lord.

15 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.

Joshua now speaks to their conscience. After reviewing the redemptive acts of God in history and challenging them to do away with other gods to serve the only the Lord, Joshua leaves room for them to make their choice. "And if it seem evil unto you to serve the Lord" presses the decision. The possibilities are clear. Either they choose to worship the Lord, or serve the gods of their forefathers, or the gods of the Amorites whose land they now occupy. Choosing to serve other gods is not a real smart choice but a possible option. Joshua wants them to think for themselves and make an honest and voluntary choice. He is not offering an alternative, but is seeking a confession of faith in Yahweh from them, which he gets (vv. 16–20). Without waiting for them to reply, Joshua declares his resolve to worship the Lord with his household—"but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD."

21 And the people said unto Joshua, Nay; but we will serve the LORD. 22 And Joshua said unto the people, Ye are witnesses against yourselves that ye have chosen you the LORD, to serve him. And they said, We are witnesses.

In spite of Joshua's words in verse 20, the people reconfirm their pledge unequivocally to serve the Lord. The picture here is that of a shout of "No!" (Heb. lo', LOW) in unison, "We will serve the LORD!" Joshua's seeming negativity and threat of punishment for disobedience do not discourage or deter them from reaffirming their pledge to God for the second time (cf. v. 18). In his response to their reaffirmation of faith in the Lord, Joshua holds them accountable and responsible to their pledge. Using judicial language, Joshua calls them witnesses to their vow to serve the Lord. Again, in unison, they reply, "We are witnesses!"

Every covenant has to be sacred and witnessed; otherwise, there is no accountability for the parties involved. A "witness" (Heb. 'ed, ADE) gives testimony or bears evidence. Not only was Joshua a witness to their choice, but the people were witnesses for each other. By acknowledging their service to the Lord, the Israelites were reconfirming their covenant with Yahweh. By their own words, they were witnesses to the covenant should they ever decide to break it again. Although we cannot and will not do it perfectly, we must demonstrate daily our faith in the God of the covenant. Most assuredly, if we do not, our own hearts are witnesses against us, in addition to the all-knowing God.

23 Now therefore put away, said he, the strange gods which are among you, and incline your heart unto the LORD God of Israel.

The people had made a choice. They had voluntarily rejected the idol gods and promised to remain faithful to the God of their forefathers. For the Israelites, the demonstration of their faith in the God of the covenant was the single, but difficult, action of putting away their idols. By putting away all idols and having no other gods before Him, we show to the Lord and to world that we belong to the Lord our God. Deep emotional attachments to and lust for the hidden idols of our hearts will destroy our lives. Believers should ask God for His grace to be faithful and keep themselves from the idols of today's world.

24 And the people said unto Joshua, The LORD our God will we serve, and his voice will we obey.

Now they have reaffirmed their choice by expressing their commitment to serve the Lord, and "obey" (Heb. shama, shaw-MA, "listen to, hear") His voice. It is said that even today sheep recognize the voice of their shepherd; they will not respond to any other voice.

When the shepherd says, "Come," they follow. This picture of devotion is why Jesus said, "My sheep hear my voice ... and they follow me" (from John 10:27). Like the people of Joshua's day, we must choose whom we will serve and obey. Jesus is our Good Shepherd. No matter how educated or wealthy we are, in reality, without a shepherd, we are just like sheep that are prone to self-destruction. The Christian today has the voice of God revealed to him in God's Word from Genesis to Revelation. We are called to hear, believe, and obey. Are you listening? Are you hearing His voice? Renew your commitment to serve God and obey His Word. God is still looking for covenant keepers today.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

Rules on People Relating to God
(Exodus 20:1–11)

TUESDAY

Rules on People Relating to People
(Exodus 20:12–17)

WEDNESDAY

Keep the Faith and Live
(Joshua 23:2–6, 14–16)

THURSDAY

Rescued from Egypt, Settled in Canaan
(Joshua 24:4–12)

FRIDAY

We Promise to Serve God
(Joshua 24:16–21)

SATURDAY

Covenant with God Confirmed
(Joshua 24:25–28)

SUNDAY

Choose to Love and Serve God
(Joshua 24:1–3, 13–15, 21–24)