



It's Time To Choose

Joshua 24:14-28

David Sunday

June 1, 2014

Open your Bibles to Joshua 24:14-28.

¹⁴ “Now therefore fear the LORD and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness. Put away the gods that your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. ¹⁵ And if it is evil in your eyes to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.”

¹⁶ Then the people answered, “Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods, ¹⁷ for it is the LORD our God who brought us and our fathers up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight and preserved us in all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed. ¹⁸ And the LORD drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land. Therefore we also will serve the LORD, for he is our God.”

¹⁹ But Joshua said to the people, “You are not able to serve the LORD, for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins. ²⁰ If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm and consume you, after having done you good.” ²¹ And the people said to Joshua, “No, but we will serve the LORD.” ²² Then Joshua said to the people, “You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen the LORD, to serve him.” And they said, “We are witnesses.” ²³ He said, “Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your heart to the LORD, the God of Israel.” ²⁴ And the people said to Joshua, “The LORD our God we will serve, and his voice we will obey.” ²⁵ So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and put in place statutes and rules for them at Shechem. ²⁶ And Joshua wrote these words in the Book of the Law of God. And he took a large stone and set it up there under the terebinth that was by the sanctuary of the LORD. ²⁷ And Joshua said to all the people, “Behold, this stone shall be a witness against us, for it has heard all the words of the LORD that he spoke to us. Therefore it shall be a witness against you, lest you deal falsely with your God.” ²⁸ So Joshua sent the people away, every man to his inheritance.

Thanks be to God for His living Word. Amen.

Commencement is a word that speaks of a new beginning. I often wonder why we talk about commencement at graduations when it seems graduation is the end of something. Yet this day of June 1st is also the beginning of something new for all of us. It is the beginning of summer. We look forward to what lies ahead and need to hear a Word from God.

For graduates, this is a time of great freedom. Finally, your parents cannot know what your grades are unless you give them explicit permission to view your academic record. I remember going on a five-month mission trip to Hawaii three weeks after graduating from high school. It was a glorious time. It was really just three months in Hawaii and two months in the Philippines. They were exciting and decisive days for me. I remember my faith being challenged and tested a lot in that first year after high school. It was a time when I was seeing clearly my own sinfulness and need for a Savior. I needed to own my faith, grow up and take greater responsibility for my life.

I want to dedicate this sermon to our youth, especially our graduates. Yet it is really a sermon for all of us. It is an ancient message first spoken by Joshua as all the tribes of Israel were summoned before him at Shechem—a beautiful, historic place in the history of the Old Testament. There were probably upwards of two million people gathered to hear Joshua proclaim this message and to renew God's covenant with His people. It is an ancient yet timeless message which demands a response from all people in every generation. It is a message immortalized in the stirring words of Joshua 24:15: "...choose [for yourselves] *this day whom you will serve... But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.*"

If we were living 30 years ago and I asked how many of you had that verse on a plaque in your house, probably over half of your hands would go up. Today we don't do that as much. It is a very memorable verse that speaks to us in whatever season of life we are. It tells us and our graduates that it is a time to choose. Now is not a time to coast but to choose. A decision is required.

As all of us wait for the summertime which finally approaches, the temptation is to say, "You know what? We have endured the most brutal winter Chicago-land has known in our lifetime. It has been 80 years since we've had a winter this cold. It's time to coast a little bit and take it easy."

I do hope we'll find rest, refreshment and relaxation this summer. But may we never seek rest independent of Jesus Christ or apart from the means of His grace—outside fellowship with Him in His Word and with His people. May we never seek rest by taking a vacation from Christianity or from His church. I hope that even as you travel this summer you will make it your aim to worship with God's people on the Lord's Day—wherever He takes you. We need to be reminded every week of His gospel and to renew our commitment with Him.

For all of us, it's time to choose. I want to especially urge graduates to receive this message and let the full weight of the authority of God's Word impress itself upon your hearts.

I have four directions from this passage designed to lead us toward a decisive, resolute, wholehearted, ongoing, personal choice to serve the Lord Jesus Christ:

1. Remember all of the great things the Lord has done for you
2. Consider the alternatives
3. Count the cost
4. Choose

Remember All The Great Things The Lord Has Done For You

Joshua begins with these words in Joshua 24:14, “*Now therefore...*” In other words, “In light of what I have just been saying, here is the response I would expect.” What has Joshua been telling them? In Joshua 23 he has been giving them a history lesson about God’s faithfulness. God has kept His promises, fought for His people, defended them and has been a mighty Warrior and gracious Savior to His people. The message is encapsulated in a beautiful, powerful way in Joshua 23:14. “*And now I am about to go the way of all the earth, [I’m going to die] and you know in your hearts and souls, all of you [you all know this], that not one word has failed of all the good things that the Lord your God promised concerning you. All have come to pass for you; not one of them has failed.*” The emphasis of Joshua’s message to the people is how God has been faithful to His Word. He has kept all His promises for them and has been good to them. Joshua is telling them to remember this.

He then rehearses their history in chapter 24:1-12. He recounts God’s covenant with Abraham and His faithfulness to the forefathers—Isaac, Jacob and Joseph. He tells of how God brought the people out of Egypt with His powerful hand, how they crossed the Jordan River into the land of their inheritance on dry feet, how God drove out all their enemies and gave them into their hands.

Joshua 24:13 is another beautiful summary. God says, “*I gave you a land on which you had not labored and cities that you had not built, and you dwell in them. You eat the fruit of vineyards and olive orchards that you did not plant.*” As we read, we see over and over again that God is the subject of all the active verbs. “*I took*” (24:3), “*I gave*” (24:4), “*I sent*” (24:5), “*I destroyed*” (24:8), “*I delivered*” (24:10). Joshua is saying, “It’s by grace you have been saved and have entered into this inheritance. It’s by grace you have been freed from all your enemies. God has done a gracious work of salvation for you.”

Joshua is preaching the gospel to God’s people. This wonderful reminder to them of all the great things God has done raises a Biblical question for each of us but especially for our youth who are embarking on a new phase of life. First Corinthians 4:7 is a question you should be pondering. Paul says, “*What do you have that you did not receive?*” Is there anything in your life which you created out of nothing or are totally responsible for? Can you say of anything, “This was my doing”? You have received

all the good things you have. “*If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it [as if it were not a gift]?*”

From time to time I use this verse in weddings as I look at the couple embarking on this new phase of their lives. I remind them of all the things that have been poured into their lives from mothers, fathers, grandparents, church and of all the blessings which have brought them to this point. All that we are and all that we have is a gift of God's grace.

If it is true that God has been good to us and has fulfilled all His promises, then a response is required. You can't remain neutral toward this God of such magnificent grace. In Joshua 24:14, Joshua says, “*Now therefore [here's how you should live] fear the Lord and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness. Put away the gods that your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord.*”

When I read these verses, they remind me of Romans 1-11. There Paul lays out the grandeur of God's grace, the riches He has bestowed on His people. He bursts into that doxology at the end of Romans 11, then says, “[in view of all God's mercies and all He has done for you] *I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies [all that you are and have] as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship*” (Romans 12:1). If you grasp what He has done for you, the only thing that makes sense is to give yourself—all that you are and have—as a living sacrifice to Him.

“...[F]ear the Lord...” (Joshua 24:14). This is the foundation of everything else. Stand in awe of God. This is not a paralyzing horror but a reverent awe where you humbly submit every area of your life to His authority and say, “I don't want there to be anything in my life which is not answerable to You, Lord. I want to live in obedience to You as You direct me.”

“...[S]erve him in sincerity and in faithfulness...” (verse 14). This is speaking of a complete, wholehearted devotion to the Lord. One commentator says, “Not the knee-jerk reaction of a moment but the steady, persevering direction of a lifetime. Not double dealing. Not offering Him the commitment of your lips while you hold back your heart. God is not mocked by lip service.” It is a wholehearted response where you put away the gods your father served, rid yourself of idols.

“*Little children, keep yourselves from idols*” (1 John 5:21). Serve the Lord and claim Him alone as your Master. Honor Him and trust His provision. Forsake whatever gets in the way of you fulfilling His purposes. Realize your heart is like an idol factory—always conjuring up counterfeit gods, things that will get in the way of your service to the Lord. Remember idolatry is like drinking saltwater. It makes you thirsty and crazy in the long haul.

Coming to Jesus is like drinking fresh water. Jesus says, “*If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living*

water'' (John 7:37-38). He will refresh you and make you a source of refreshment to others. The remedy to half-hearted, lukewarm, superficial devotion is to remember what He's done for you.

I was thinking about this and was reminded of the song 10,000 Reasons by Matt Redmon. Have you ever sung that song? "10,000 reasons for my heart to find" to bless You, Lord. I love that song and what it expresses. Yet then I thought, "Am I just mouthing pious platitudes when I sing 10,000 Reasons? Can I name ten specific reasons why I want to bless the Lord with all that is within me today?"

I felt I needed to write down ten specific reasons for my heart to bless the Lord. As I did that, I was reminded of how good He is to me. I would encourage you to do the same thing. When we sing and say these things to God, we need more than pious concepts. There needs to be reality to it. Joshua is reminding the people of specific things God has done for them because that is what will motivate them to choose to serve the Lord with all they have. So specifically name reasons and write them down. Graduates, as you are at a crossroads in your life, this is a good time to write down some of the things God has done for you for which you are grateful. That will motivate you to live for Him.

Consider The Alternatives

Joshua is aware that there will be a struggle within the people's hearts. Their commitment to serve the Lord will be challenged and contested continually. So he says to them, "*And if it is evil in your eyes [if it is distasteful to you or you find it repugnant and undesirable] to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve''*" (Joshua 24:15). Consider the alternatives.

Every new day presents us with a decision. Will we respond to God's grace in our lives and yield ourselves wholly to Him or not? We will be tempted.

We sing,

Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,
Prone to leave the God I love...

(from Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing by Robert Robinson, 1735-1790)

There is a battle waging in our hearts that sometimes makes it seem evil and undesirable for us to serve the Lord. We live in a culture where Christianity is strange and is becoming stranger by the day. What we believe God's Word teaches about sexual ethics is strange and becoming increasingly stranger in the world. You have to decide now—before you are in the heat of the battle—where you will stand. Will you stand on the authority of God's Word or have your finger held up to the wind? Will you be blown about by the changing drifts of our culture? Where will you stand? Decide now, for the temptation is to try to make Christianity more palatable to the world. When we go with that temptation, we mute our faith or adapt to fit in with the culture instead of embracing the strangeness of Christianity with clarity and conviction.

We have a faith which says, “Jesus Christ rose from the dead bodily. He’s alive today, will return in the future and will make a new heaven and new earth.” If those things are not true, don’t be a Christian because it’s not worth coming to church. This is the foundation of our faith. Yet it is strange to believe these things in our world today. However, this strange message is precisely what our world needs. We have to decide with clarity that we believe in the authority of God’s Word.

At times you’ll find that Christians are strange. You may feel alienated from the church. You’ll look around and see Christians who appear inauthentic to you. You’ll realize that Mom and Dad, other Christians and the church are flawed. You may be tempted to think, “It’s undesirable to serve the Lord. I’d like to put Christianity on hold for a while, be a free agent, dabble with agnosticism, be non-committal and just live my way.”

Joshua understood you would have that battle in your heart. He knew that it sometimes feels evil to serve the Lord. Yet he wanted you to understand it is not possible to remain non-committal or to stay on the fence. Everybody has to serve somebody. You are not a free agent. The question is Whom are you going to serve? Do you know whom you are serving and what is directing your life?

Colin Smith writes, “Which God are you serving? If you’re not serving the Lord, you have put someone or something else in the place that belongs to God. It is of the greatest importance that you be clear and honest about who or what that is.”

“*And if it is evil in your eyes to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River...*” Joshua is recalling where they were before they came out of Egypt and asking, “How well did those gods defend the Egyptians against the God of Israel? Remember your history? The Egyptian army all drowned in the Red Sea. That’s how powerful those gods are. Maybe you don’t want to serve them.” “*...or the gods of the Amorites in whose land [the Promised Land] you dwell...*” How did the gods of the Amorites do when the Israelites came into the land? They failed their people.

So will you serve the old gods or the newer, trendy gods? Will you serve the gods of the 18th or 21st century—postmodernism, self-autonomy or paganism? What will it be? Doing it your way and being a free agent is not an option. Everybody has to serve somebody. Whom will you serve?

Joshua’s next statement would be a good Father’s Day message as he takes ownership and responsibility for his household. He says, “*But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord*” (Joshua 24:15). We have found Him to be true, faithful, good, lovely, desirable and we will serve Him.

There is an old, very sublime statement by St. Augustine. It is the type of thing you could dwell on for an hour and not exhaust its meaning. I want you to think a bit about what Augustine saw. Here is a man who was freed from the idols of lust and selfish ambition. He found great joy and beauty in serving the Lord. Listen to his description of what it is like to love the Lord:

But what do I love when I love my God? Not the sweet melody of harmony in song, not the fragrance of flowers' perfumes and spices, not manna or honey, not limbs such as the body delights to embrace...

He is describing the beauty of created things. One of the joys of growing from youth into adulthood is when your soul and mind start to expand to comprehend the beauty of created things—the world of literature, art and physical human beauty. You start to notice things you didn't notice when you were eight years old. As Augustine awakened to the beauty of created things, he was living for and loving those things independently of God.

He says that when he loves God, it's not in a fleshly, materialistic sense. It is not these that he loves when he loves his God. But what does he love? Look at the rest of the quote:

And yet, when I love Him, it is true that I love a light of a certain kind—a voice, a perfume, a food, an embrace.

I love his description of God as a light, voice, perfume, food and embrace. When we sing, "I am Yours and You are mine", we are describing an embrace.

Augustine continues:

But they are of the kind I love in my inner self. There is a delight in my inner man, a spiritual delight in the grandeur, glory and beauty of my God.

He tries to describe it by saying,

When my soul is bathed in light it is not bound by space. When it listens to sound that never dies away.

I've been listening lately to Yo-Yo Ma playing Gabriel's Oboe and sometimes play it in my office until the tears are running down my cheeks. There is an exquisite beauty to that music and in a sense I don't want it to end. When I love my God I listen to a sound that never dies away.

When it breathes fragrance that is not borne away on the wind. When it tastes food that is never consumed by the eating. When it clings to an embrace from which it is not severed by fulfillment of desire. This is what I love when I love my God.

Is there anything or anyone in your life whom you could describe with this kind of beauty and satisfaction? Is there anything that can compare with this? Consider the alternatives. You have to decide whom you will serve. Will it be this? Or will you be carried down the raging tide of culture, over the falls, only to crash on the rocks in the end?

Count The Cost

Look at Joshua 24:16-17: *“Then the people answered, ‘Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods, for it is the LORD our God who brought us and our fathers up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery...’”* They then echo all the things God has done for them in their history and come to the conclusion: *“Therefore we also will serve the Lord, for he is our God”* (verse 18). “We’re in, Joshua. We’ve heard your message and we agree.”

This is every preacher’s dream. If there would be an altar call, every one of them would come forward and say, “We’re with you. We have decided to follow Jesus and will serve the Lord.” That’s why it is so shocking how Joshua responds. They make the commitment and say they will do what he’s been telling them to do.

Joshua looks them in the eye and says, “No you won’t. I don’t believe you. You will not do this.” *“You are not able to serve the Lord, for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins. [I don’t think that period should be there] If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods”* (Joshua 24:19-20). If you apostasize and reject Him, *“...then he will turn and do you harm and consume you, after having done you good”* (verse 20).

Joshua is saying the same thing Jesus did when He told His disciples to count the cost. “You cannot be my disciple if you try to serve two masters.” Joshua is challenging the people’s commitment. He knows the waywardness of their hearts and that a new generation will rise. In the book of Judges, the refrain of that new generation is: “Everyone did that which was right in his own eyes” (Judges 21:25). Joshua knows this is the case and is challenging a flippant, easy, “Yes, I’ll go along” type of commitment.

John Calvin has a great statement about this. He says,

When the Lord brings men under His authority, they are usually willing enough to profess zeal for piety, though they instantly fall away from it. Thus they build without a foundation. This happens because they neither distrust their own weakness as much as they ought, nor consider how difficult it is to bind themselves wholly to the Lord.

Why does Joshua say, *“You are not able to serve the Lord”*? He understands that they do not “...distrust their own weakness as much as they ought, nor consider how difficult it is to bind themselves wholly to the Lord.” It is not an easy thing to live for Jesus in this culture. It is difficult and we have weaknesses in our own hearts. If it feels like it fits easily and comfortably into our lives in a casual way, we are probably not taking the authority of God’s Word very seriously.

Calvin continues, “There is need, therefore, of serious examination lest we be carried aloft by some giddy movement and so fail of success in our very first attempts.” Following the Lord is much easier to talk about than it is to do. It’s easy to make token commitments, give part of yourself to Christ, or strike a deal with God. “God, I’ll do this for You if You do this for me.” Many want His benefits but reject His commands. Many feel the danger of sin but not its filthiness.

Robert Murray M'Cheyne says, "We easily see that there is a hell in our sins but we do not feel our sins to be a hell." Joshua says it doesn't work that way because God is holy, jealously demands all of you and will not forgive sins which we are not willing to forsake. God will not forgive people for following other gods if they are still holding on to those gods. Colin Smith says, "You cannot ask God to forgive you for a sin that you have no intention of abandoning." Joshua says, "Remember all the Lord has done for you, consider the alternatives, count the cost and choose."

Choose

Choose to serve the Lord. Joshua 24:21 brings us to a point of decision. "*And the people said to Joshua, 'No, but we will serve the Lord.'*" They make a deliberate, personal, perpetual choice. They will go on serving Him with exclusive devotion. Joshua says, "Okay, if you've counted the cost, are ready to serve Him, have considered the alternatives and have chosen the living God, here's how you need to respond." "*Then put away the foreign gods [idols] that are among you*" (verse 23).

What if Jesus came into your dorm room? Would He find anything you'd hope He would not see? If He browsed your computer's internet history, would you be ashamed of what He found? You cannot serve Him until you're willing and ready to eliminate everything displeasing to Him in your life. Yes, He's longsuffering, gracious, and patient with us. Praise Him for that! Yet when He shines the spotlight of His holiness on an area of our lives and says, "That is idolatry," He demands a demolition project. Tear it down and put it away.

If you read 1 John 5:21, you see the New Testament and Old Testament are in perfect agreement on this point and every point. "*Little children, keep yourselves from idols.*" Put away the idols and "*incline your heart to the Lord, the God of Israel*" (Joshua 24:23). He's been using love language throughout this passage, saying things like "*...cling to the Lord your God*" (Joshua 23:8). Cleave to Him, "*incline your heart*" to Him. Give God your heart, pour your heart out to Him, speak to Him from your heart. Say to Him daily, "I want to follow You and surrender all to You."

This is beautiful because it tells us God does not want to be a deity at a distance. wants to be your Savior, your Friend, Who is very present in your time of need (Psalm 46:1). Serving is partnership with Him—inclining your heart to the One Who wants to change you and free you from everything that would destroy you. He wants you to be united with Him and be in a heart-to-heart relationship with Him. There your greatest joys, desires, meaning and obligations are found in trusting, loving, desiring, fearing and worshipping Him. There you are seeking nothing apart from Christ to make you happy, satisfied or fulfilled because all you have is Christ and He is your life. "*Incline your heart*" to Him. Put away the idols.

There is one more thing you have to do if you are going to be resolute in this choice to serve the Lord. You've got to pursue accountability. Joshua says, "*You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen the Lord, to serve him. And they said, 'We are witnesses'*" (Joshua 24:22). They are saying, "We will hold each other accountable to these things."

I urge those of you who are moving on to college or other phases of life to find a local church immediately. Join yourself to a church where you will receive the means of grace, be in fellowship with God's people and pursue relationships with the kinds of people who will help you remember your commitments to Jesus Christ and remind you when you go astray with your heart that is prone to wander, "You have chosen to serve the Lord." When you get married, there will be struggles and in the church, there will be people who remind you of the covenant you have made to one another.

That is what's happening in this passage. Covenant renewal is taking place. Who do you have in your life who stirs you up to love and good deeds saying, "I am a witness against you, if I need to be, that you have chosen to serve the Lord. I'm not going to let you lightly walk away from Him." You need those kinds of relationships in your life.

This wonderful scene ends with Joshua making a covenant with the people (verse 25), writing the words in the book of the Law of God and setting up a large stone under the terebinth by the sanctuary of the Lord (verse 26). "*And Joshua said to all the people, 'Behold, this stone shall be a witness against us, for it has heard all the words of the Lord that he spoke to us. Therefore it shall be a witness against you, lest you deal falsely with your God'*" (verse 27).

Christ is the Cornerstone; we are the living stones (1 Peter 2:4-8). The church is His holy temple and the table is the place of remembrance where we practice ongoing, covenant renewal and remind ourselves that we have chosen to serve the Lord Jesus Christ. This demands all from us.

Here are two prayers you can use to express to the Lord what Joshua called the people to express. I want you to have the opportunity to echo these prayers to the Lord in your own heart and say, "Yes, this is my commitment.

- "I have chosen to serve You, Lord."
- "Lord, I am willing to receive what You give, to lack what You withhold, to relinquish what You take, to suffer what You inflict, to be what You require" (from Jerry Bridges).

If you say with Joshua and with God's people throughout the ages, "Yes, I will serve the Lord," I want you to quietly, from your heart, affirm these commitments, this act of surrender to Him.

Let's pray.

God, not one word has failed of all the good promises You have made to Your people. They are all yes and amen in Jesus Christ. Great things You have taught us, great things You have done in our lives and great is our rejoicing through Jesus Your Son. In view of all the mercies You have shown us in Jesus

Christ, we want to renew our commitment to You. Maybe some are making this commitment for the first time. From our hearts we say, "I am willing, Lord, to receive what You give, to lack what You withhold, to relinquish what You take, to suffer what You inflict and to be all You require." I present myself as a living sacrifice to You. Amen.

Here is a prayer from John Calvin: "Unto You, O Lord, I offer my heart promptly and sincerely." I would encourage you to begin your days with this simple prayer. The symbol of John Calvin's life was open hands with a heart in the middle. This prayer reflected the commitment of his life. If you have chosen to serve the Lord, I would ask you to say this prayer out loud: "Unto You, O Lord, I offer my heart promptly and sincerely."

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