

Choose

Joshua 24: 14 – 18ⁱ

The Captain's Last Sermon

The occasion for the exhortation that we read a moment ago, referred to by James Montgomery Boice as “The Captain's Last Sermon”ⁱⁱ is found in the very first verse of Joshua chapter 24. Thirty years after he led Israel across the Jordan River and into the promised land, now 110 years old and nearing the end of his life, we're told that

¹ Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel. And they presented themselves before God. Joshua 24:1 (ESV)

So, just as Moses had gathered the tribes on the plains of the Jordan to impart one last message, Joshua did the same at Shechem. These words, recorded in chapter 24, would be his last words to the people that he had led or helped to lead for seven decades. Under the circumstances we would expect something weighty, but if biblical exposition can be defined as

“communicating the meaning of a text or passage of Scripture in terms of contemporary culture, with the specific goal of helping people to understand and obey the truth of God.”ⁱⁱⁱ

(and it can), then these are not simply famous last words. Rather, they are a sermon, because look at how Israel's captain and deliverer begins in verse 2:

² ...“Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel...” Joshua 24:2 (ESV)

What follows, then, is not the word of Joshua. It is the Word of the Lord. This is Joshua speaking as a prophet. This is God speaking to His people through the one whom He had chosen to lead them. And speaking through Joshua, God recounts the whole history of His people. As we noted:

² ...“Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, ‘Long ago, your fathers lived beyond the Euphrates, Terah, the father of Abraham and of Nahor; and they served other gods. Joshua 24:2 (ESV)

(remember that; it will be important), but God did not Abraham to pagan darkness. He went on to say:

³ Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan, and made his offspring many. I gave him Isaac. ⁴ And to Isaac I gave Jacob and Esau. And I gave Esau the hill country of Seir to possess, but Jacob and his children went down to Egypt. ⁵ And I sent Moses and Aaron, and I plagued Egypt with what I did in the midst of it, and afterward I brought you out. Joshua 24:3–5 (ESV)

You can read the subsequent history for yourself in verses 6 – 13. There's a lot there and it's worth more consideration than I can give it this morning, but the important thing for now, is to realize that the invitation in the following verses was not a free-standing invitation. It did not

come to Israel out of the clear blue sky. It was not Joshua speaking to a gathering of unbelievers and pagans, urging them to “Try Jesus,” as, sadly, more than one song has suggested.

Now Therefore...

This is Joshua speaking to God’s covenant people, some of whom were old enough to remember Egypt and all that God had done in the mean time, and most of whom had come across the Jordan by the mighty power of God just thirty years earlier. This is Joshua “preaching to the choir,” as we might say today, and this message, even then, was for the church. It was not a call to repentance unto life and salvation. It was a call to committment. It was (and is) a call to holiness and service. We see it in the opening words of verse 14:

¹⁴ “Now therefore fear the LORD and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness...” Joshua 24:14 (ESV)

“Therefore” here is not unlike the “therefore” in Romans 12, verse 1, where Paul wrote,

¹ I appeal to you therefore, brothers... Romans 12:1 (ESV)

And why “therefore”? Because, Romans 11, 33 – 36.

³³ Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! ³⁴ “For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?” ³⁵ “Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?” ³⁶ For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen. Romans 11:33–36 (ESV)

¹ I appeal to you **therefore**...by the mercies of God... Romans 12:1 (ESV)

(because of who God is and all that He has done),

to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Romans 12:1 (ESV)

As Joshua said,

¹⁴ “Now therefore fear the LORD and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness...” Joshua 24:14 (ESV)

In other words, you have received the very same grace of God as Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the Fathers, “Now therefore,” live in that grace. “Now therefore” be holy in that grace.

...Be Holy

¹⁴ “...Put away the gods that your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. Joshua 24:14 (ESV)

Of course, the God’s of our society are more sophisticated than the God’s served by the fathers “beyond the River and in Egypt...” We would never bow to Baal, or Molech, or Dagon. We know right well that “what pagans sacrifice gthey offer to demons and not to God,”^{iv} don’t we?. But consider Paul’s words in Philippians 3. He wrote:

¹⁸ For many walk, of whom I often told you, and now tell you even weeping, that they are enemies of the cross of Christ, ¹⁹ whose end is destruction, **whose god is their appetite,** and whose glory is in their shame, who set their minds on earthly things. Philippians 3:18–19 (NASB 95)

The Greek is literally, “whose god is their belly...” but I think “appetite” gets to the intent. This isn’t just about food. It’s about our appetite for “earthly things”—I could make a list (money, sexuality, power, prestige, experience, novelty, the pursuit of happiness) but what would be the point.? All those earthly things that we covet even though we know that in the end, apart from God, they lead to destruction, these are the gods of our age. These are the things that we must “put away” if we would be set apart as living sacrifices, “holy and acceptable to God.”

...Serve the Lord

Which is, of course, the point. It is simply our “reasonable service”^v given who God is and all that He has done. It’s what we read in Joshua 24:

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...” Joshua 24:14 (ESV)

(just in case you didn’t catch it the first time)

...serve the LORD. Joshua 24:14 (ESV)

The people of Israel had been delivered from Egypt and from the wilderness for just this purpose, that they might serve the Lord, and if you have been saved—if you have been delivered from the domain of darkness and transferred to the kingdom of God’s beloved Son^{vi}—then it is for the same. We know Paul’s words in Ephesians 2, verses 8 and 9:

⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast. Ephesians 2:8–9 (ESV)

But never forget verse 10:

¹⁰ For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. Ephesians 2:10 (ESV)

We were not saved by grace through faith so that we could live our best life now and go to heaven when we die. We were not saved by grace through faith so that we could spend the rest of our life in this world

³ ...in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind... Ephesians 2:3 (ESV)

We were saved for

...good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. Ephesians 2:10 (ESV)

We were saved to serve the Lord.

Choose this day whom you will serve.

And, as the late Bob Dylan once sang, the truth is,

...you're gonna have to serve somebody, yes indeed. You're gonna have to serve somebody...It may be the devil or it may be the Lord, but you're gonna have to serve somebody.^{vii}

I think Joshua would have agreed, and on that day long ago, he gathered the covenant people together and called out to them:

¹⁵ "...if it is evil in your eyes to serve the LORD, **choose this day whom you will serve...**"
Joshua 24:15 (ESV)

Centuries later, Elijah would make a similar appeal at the top of Mount Carmel. He said:

²¹ "...How long will you go limping between two different opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him." ^{1 Kings 18:21 (ESV)}

See, the question has always been not "whether" but "which". There's no such thing as spiritual neutrality. You're gonna have to serve somebody, yes indeed, and you do. So, on this first day of this new year we are faced with the same challenge that hung in the air all those centuries ago.

¹⁵ "...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." ^{Joshua 24:15 (ESV)}

But if the Lord is God—if Jesus Christ has conquered death and hell, and risen to the right hand of the Father to reign as King of kings and Lord of lords (and He has)—then follow Him. If

⁷ In [Christ] we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace... ^{Ephesians 1:7 (ESV)}

—if

¹¹ In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will... ^{Ephesians 1:11 (ESV)}

(and we have)—then may we choose, and may we say, as Joshua did so long ago,

¹⁵ "...as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD." ^{Joshua 24:15 (ESV)}

i All Scripture citations, unless otherwise noted, *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016).
ii James Montgomery Boice, *Joshua* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005), 130.
iii Boice, *Joshua*, 131.
iv Cf. 1 Corinthians 10: 20.
v Cf. Romans 12: 1 KJV (and others) where λογικὴν [logikēn] is translated as "reasonable".
vi Cf. Colossians 1: 13 – 14.
vii Bob Dylan, "Gotta Serve Somebody", at <https://www.bobdylan.com/songs/gotta-serve-somebody/>