



Today is our last study in the book of Joshua which we began in September. We started with God calling Joshua as Israel's new leader, charging him to be strong and courageous and lead the people across the Jordan River and into the Promised Land. We saw how Israel stepped out in faith and God did miraculous things as they conquered Jericho and the rest of Canaan. And then we saw how they divided up the land between the twelve tribes, each one being given an inheritance.

Then the book ends, fittingly, with three speeches given by Joshua: In chapter 22 he spoke to the two-and-a-half tribes of Reuben, Gad and Manassah, who were returning to their land east of the Jordan.

In chapter 23 he spoke to the leaders of Israel, calling them to drive out the remaining Canaanites, not to become allies with them or intermarry with them, but to hold fast to the Lord and love him with all their heart.

In chapter 24 he spoke to the entire nation at a place called Shechem, an important place in the history of God's people. In Shechem God promised Abraham he'd have many descendants. It was there Jacob purchased a plot of ground for 100 pieces of silver and built an altar. No wonder it says in v. 1 the whole nation came together and *"presented themselves before God."* It was a holy convocation in a holy place. They weren't playing games. They weren't there to be entertained. They were there to stand before God and renew their covenant with him. In some ways, that's what we do here on Sunday mornings.

Joshua 24 is like their signature on the contract. In the middle of this speech Joshua says, *"choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve... But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord."* This is a call to sign on the dotted line and serve the Lord alone.

These words are appropriate for us today. Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve. Many of us would like to think we're free and we don't serve anyone. But behind this challenge is the assumption we all serve someone. Bob Dylan was right on that. He wrote the song in 1979, "Gotta Serve Somebody." The song started:

*You may be an ambassador to England or France
You may like to gamble, you might like to dance
You may be the heavyweight champion of the world
You may be a socialite with a long string of pearls.*

But 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.

It's true. We should all think about that. Who have I chosen to serve? How does that show up in my life? What does that mean for me today? It's important to see Joshua didn't start with this challenge. In fact, the challenge comes in the middle of his speech. Instead he started with a reminder of all God had done in their past. Before he challenges them to choose God, he reminds them of how God in his lavish grace chose them.

The Past Realities of God's Grace

God chose Israel

Joshua begins in verses 2-4:

Joshua said to all 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 worshiped other gods. But I took your father Abraham from the land beyond the Euphrates and led him throughout Canaan and gave him many descendants. I gave him Isaac, and to Isaac I gave Jacob and Esau. I assigned the hill country of Seir to Esau, but Jacob and his family went down to Egypt.'

Joshua speaks for God here, like a prophet. He uses the first person singular. Repeatedly, God says, "I did this for you." Here he goes back to the patriarchs and says, "I took your father Abraham. I gave him Isaac. I gave Isaac Jacob and Esau." Notice he says you didn't have a particularly impressive genealogy. Your father Abraham came from a family of idol worshippers. God plucked him out of the miry bog of paganism. He didn't select the "pick of the litter" so to speak; he selected the runt. Right from the start God wants them to know their identity as God's people is an act of grace. It has nothing to do with their virtue. Abraham didn't seek God and then find him; it was God who sought Abraham. And he didn't do it because he saw something special in them; it was an act of grace.

God delivered Israel

Then he goes on and tells how God delivered Israel.

"Then I sent Moses and Aaron, and I afflicted the Egyptians by what I did there, and I brought you out. When I brought your people out of Egypt, you came to the sea, and the Egyptians pursued them with chariots and horsemen as far as the Red Sea. But they cried to the Lord for help, and he put darkness between you and the Egyptians; he brought the sea over them and covered them. You saw with your own eyes what I did to

the Egyptians. Then you lived in the wilderness for a long time (verses 5-7).

Again the emphasis is on what God did. And what's really on display here is God's power. God says, "I delivered you from Egypt. I brought you through the Red Sea." There's no way Israel could have pulled any of this off on their own. They were doomed unless God stepped in and acted. This was true in the wilderness as well. Notice he says, "Then you lived in the wilderness a long time." The fact they survived in the wilderness for 40 years, eating manna from heaven and drinking water from a rock, is another testimony to the grace of God.

God protected Israel

He goes on and talks about how he protected Israel.

"I brought you to the land of the Amorites who lived east of the Jordan. They fought against you, but I gave them into your hands. I destroyed them from before you, and you took possession of their land. When Balak son of Zippor, the king of Moab, prepared to fight against Israel, he sent for Balaam son of Beor to put a curse on you. But I would not listen to Balaam, so he blessed you again and again, and I delivered you out of his hand (verses 8-10).

Here are the first fruits of victory before they crossed the Jordan. These victories struck fear in the hearts of the people of Jericho. Remember how Rahab said to the spies, "We have heard...what you did to the Amorites east of the Jordan. When we heard of it our hearts melted in fear because of you." And then he focuses in on one story of God's protection. The false prophet Balaam was hired by King Balak to curse Israel. The assumption was if God allowed him to do this, Israel would indeed have been cursed. But God didn't allow it. Instead of cursing Israel, God made Balaam bless Israel! Once again, God's grace and protection of his people is on display.

God gave Israel the land

Finally, God recounts what we've seen here in Joshua; how God gave them the land as he promised.

"Then you crossed the Jordan and came to Jericho. The citizens of Jericho fought against you, as did also the Amorites, Perizzites, Canaanites, Hittites, Girgashites, Hivites and Jebusites, but I gave them into your hands. I sent the hornet ahead of you, which drove them out before you—also the two Amorite kings. You did not do it with your own sword and bow. So I gave you a land on which you did not toil and cities you did not build; and you live in them and eat from vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant" (verses 11-13).

All these people came against them, but God says I gave them into your hand. The "hornet" may be an actual insect but it also may be a metaphor for the panic and terror that went before Israel and paralyzed the Canaanites. And the result of all this? God says, "I gave you land you didn't buy, cities you didn't build, and vineyards you didn't even plant." In other words, it's all grace. You didn't earn it; you don't deserve it. I gave it to you because of my sovereign grace.

Why does God go into this long rehearsal of their salvation history before he calls them to choose who they'll serve? Because this is the foundation for serving him. This is the "Why?" behind their choice. They were to choose him because of God's lavish grace. And it's no different for us. It all starts with God's grace.

This is what Paul is saying in Romans when he writes, *"Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship"* (Romans 12:1). Paul says, give your whole life to God. Offer up everything you are. But why? Don't miss the words: "in view of God's mercy." That's what God is saying to the Israelites: "In view of my mercy and grace, choose to serve no one else but me."

We know more of his mercies today than even Israel knew. Today he says to us, "I loved you from the very beginning. I initiated a relationship with you when you were dead in your sins. You were in bondage, but I reached down and freed you. I sent my Son to die for you. He conquered sin and death and was raised to life. And now, you're raised to life if you trust him as Savior." You see, that's **our** salvation history. It's against that backdrop we're called to make the choice to serve God. We're like an 18-year-old with a car. We know the law says to obey the speed limit, but for a lot of us that's not enough. So maybe someone older approaches us and says the same thing, "Obey the speed limit. Otherwise you'll endanger yourself and others." But I'm just 18 years old; I think I can handle anything, so I say to him, "What's the big deal? Why should I listen to you?" Then he says, "Because I'm your father and I love you. I've raised you, provided for you and protected you all your life. I know what's best for you. Not only that, I bought the car!"

We don't obey and serve to earn God's favor; we obey and serve him **because** of his favor ("in view of God's mercies"). It's not like we're paying off a debt to God (we could never do enough) but rather it's the reciprocity of love and loyalty that's in view here. A child isn't indebted to his father, but he's bound to him in filial love. That's what it means to be in covenant. And yet even after so many experiences of God's grace, our sin still clings to us. That's why starting in v. 14 Joshua urges them to *"throw away the gods your ancestors worshipped."*

The Present Response to God's Grace: Serve Him Alone

Look at what he says in verses 14-15.

"Now fear the Lord and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your ancestors worshiped beyond the Euphrates 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 ancestors served beyond the Euphrates, 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 is no longer speaking as God but as himself. He calls them to an exclusive commitment to the Lord: Fear him. Serve him faithfully. Throw away your other gods. He uses the verb "to

serve" over and over again in his speech. Joshua says something very interesting: If you don't want to serve the Lord, then choose whom you will serve. You have three options. You can serve the gods your ancestors served back in Abraham's day, you can serve the gods of the Egyptians, or you can serve the gods of your new neighbors in Canaan. The choice isn't between the true God and false gods, but rather between three sets of false gods! There's some irony in this. It's like, check the box, which one of those losers do you want? But then he adds, "as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord." The NIV uses the future tense here ("we will serve"), but the Hebrew tense has a fuller meaning. It expresses continuous action. It involves the future, but it can also point to the past and the present. Joshua is saying, "I have chosen, I am choosing, and I will chose to serve the Lord."

Joshua wasn't just blowing smoke. As a young man when the people worshipped the golden calf at Mt. Sinai, he didn't participate. When the spies gave a bad report after visiting Canaan, he stood with Caleb and gave a report filled with faith. When God commanded him to cross the Jordan and take the land he didn't flinch. That's Joshua—he chose, and he chose and he kept right on choosing.

We have to make a choice as well. We're living in a time when serving Jesus is seen as just one of many options on a ten page menu. Hear this challenge: "Who will you serve? Make a choice! You gotta serve somebody!" It's an imperative each of us needs to hear throughout our lives. Every season of life presents a new opportunity to say, "Yes, Lord, today I'm all in." Examine our own relationship with Jesus. Have you wholeheartedly made that choice — today, in this season? Are you bringing your household with you in that? It starts with confessing your need for a Savior, trusting Christ's saving work on the cross to deliver you from condemnation and experiencing his forgiveness. But it doesn't stop there. Throughout our lives we have to keep choosing to be all in. It's like a card game—every hand that's dealt you have to decide if you'll ante up.

But it's not something to take lightly. We should count the cost. Notice how the people respond to Joshua.

Then the people answered, "Far be it from us to forsake the Lord to serve other gods! It was the Lord our God himself who brought us and our parents up out of Egypt, from that land of slavery, and performed those great signs before our eyes. He protected us on our entire journey and among all the nations through which we traveled. And the Lord drove out before us all the nations, including the Amorites, who lived in the land. We too will serve the Lord, because he is our God" (verses 16-18).

So the people, having seen all God had done for them, say they want to make the same choice as Joshua. "We too will serve the Lord." It sounds good, doesn't it? If I'm a preacher this is what I want. What a response! It's like the whole nation came forward for an altar call! Let's get them in our new believer's class and plugged into a Community Group! Why would I throw cold

water on a response like that? But Joshua knows these people and he detects something lacking in their response.

The Future is Dependent on God's Grace

Look what he says in verses 19-24:

Joshua said to the people, "You are not able to serve the Lord. He is a holy God; he is a jealous God. He will not forgive your rebellion and your sins. If you forsake the Lord and serve foreign gods, he will turn and bring disaster on you and make an end of you, after he has been good to you."

But the people said to Joshua, "No! We will serve the Lord."

Then Joshua said, "You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen to serve the Lord."

"Yes, we are witnesses," they replied.

"Now then," said Joshua, "throw away the foreign gods that are among you and yield your hearts to the Lord, the God of Israel."

And the people said to Joshua, "We will serve the Lord our God and obey him" (verses 19-24).

What a curious interchange! Joshua says, "You're not able to serve the Lord." He's confronting them with the seriousness of their promise. "God is holy and jealous and you can't take his forgiveness for granted. If you forsake him he'll bring disaster on you and make an end to you." They come right back at him, "No! We will serve the Lord!" He calls them as witnesses against themselves and they agree again. Then he commands them to throw away their foreign gods and yield their hearts to God. Stop there. This seems to imply they had some foreign gods in their possession. Why else would he say to throw them away? I think Joshua expected them to head for their tents and bring out the idols hidden under their sleeping bags. But what do they do? They just repeat what they said before — we'll serve the Lord.

When God says to do something, we should actually do it rather than just say we'll do it. I heard a good illustration of this recently. Suppose a mom or dad tells their daughter to clean her room. She says, "That's a great idea!" Then she comes back an hour later and says, "Hey mom, I memorized what you said to me. 'Clean your room.'" As a parent I'm not going to say, "That's awesome! I'm so glad you memorized that." Or maybe she comes back and says, "Hey dad, I got a bunch of my friends together and we discussed what it really means to have a clean room. I have a much better understanding of that now." As a dad, I'm not going to say, "Wow! That's awesome!" Or maybe she comes back and says, "Hey mom and dad, look what I did. I wrote those words 'Clean your room' in beautiful calligraphy on a plaque and put it up on the wall in my room." I'm not going to say, "Great handwriting!" Why? Because I want her to actually clean her room!

It's like when Jesus said, "*Why do you call me 'Lord,' when you don't do what I say?*" (Luke 6:46) and, "*Not everyone who calls me 'Lord, Lord' will enter the kingdom of heaven. It's the one who does the will of my Father*" (Matt. 7:21). This is a warning to all of us against easy believe-ism or cheap grace. Dietrich Bonhoeffer

says, "Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance... Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ."

I believe at this point Joshua realized more words were useless. So he took them at their word. Verses 25-28 tell us how he recorded all these things in the book of the law. And then he took a large stone and set it up as a memorial to remind them and future generations they were accountable to serve the Lord.

Then in verses 29-33 there are three burials recorded as the book comes to a close. First Joshua dies at the age of 110. He was given the highest honor possible, being called "the servant of the Lord" as Moses his predecessor was. Isn't that what you'd want on your tombstone? Then we're told Joseph's bones were buried in the plot of ground at Shechem which Jacob had bought. In Egypt Joseph made the Israelites swear they'd bury his remains in the Promised Land. Finally, Eleazar the priest died.

There's also a note added along with the report of Joshua's death. It says, "*Israel served the Lord throughout the lifetime of Joshua and of the elders who outlived him and who had experienced everything the Lord had done for Israel*" (Joshua 24:31). It begs the question, why didn't the next generation serve the Lord?

This reveals the problem with what we call the old covenant. That's what Joshua 24 is. It's a renewal of the covenant God made with Israel at Mt Sinai. That covenant God said, "Here's my law. Now go and obey it. If you don't obey it, there will be consequences." Of course we know the whole thing failed. All you have to do is read the rest of the OT to see that. Just turn the page in your Bible and read the first chapter of the book of Judges. It says the next generation "*knew neither the Lord nor what he had done for Israel*" and "*forsook the Lord...who had brought them out of Egypt*" (Judges 2:10-12).

But the good news is Jesus came to offer a new covenant, and in that covenant we're not just told what to do but we're given the very life of God within us. The Spirit of the living God, the Spirit of the Lord Jesus, comes to dwell in our hearts and begins a work of transformation from the inside out. So Paul can say, "*The law kills but the Spirit gives life*" (2 Cor. 3:6). He could say, "*We're being transformed into his image, with ever increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit*" (2 Cor. 3:18). So while our choices continue to hold significance, we have a resource working within us to make us people who don't just pay lip service to God, but actually obey him from the heart. You gotta serve somebody, and without the Spirit of God living within you your choice to serve God will be nothing but lip service.

I want to close today with two practical applications. First, if you're straddling the fence in your commitment to the Lord, stop

today. There comes a time to say, "I'm all in." Some people never stop investigating the claims of Christ, always seeking but never committing. Certainly there's a place for examining the gospel before you commit. But it's tragic if you never get beyond investigating. You gotta make a choice. You gotta serve somebody. Who will it be?

If you're going to do that in our society, you must be willing to stand alone at times. Like Israel we're surrounded with people who worship idols of money, sex, intellect and power. Israel tried to blend a bit of Canaanite religion with a bit of Bible religion. It didn't work. Jesus said we're the salt of earth. We're supposed to influence others instead of letting them influence us. Jesus said if the salt loses its taste, it's good for nothing. You must be willing to go public with your faith. Some of you are secret-service Christians. Jesus calls you to stand up and speak for him, to tell others of his life-changing grace.

Don't make this decision to serve him lightly. Following Christ is the most exciting thing in the world. I've never been bored in the years since I gave my life to Christ in high school. But following Christ isn't easy or comfortable. There are costs, demands made on you. Jesus encouraged us to count the cost. He once said, "*Suppose a king is about to go to war against another king. Won't he first sit down and consider whether he's able with ten thousand men to oppose the one coming against him with twenty-thousand?*" Then he said, "*In the same way, if you don't give up everything you have cannot be my disciples*" (Luke 14:31-33).

Second, don't do any of this without an understanding of the gospel. Root yourself deeply in the knowledge of his love for you, his commitment to you, his lavish grace in your life. Constantly rehearse the truth of the gospel in your head: I'm loved. I'm forgiven through Christ. I have the hope of eternal life. I have the transforming power of God's Spirit with me. Preach that to yourself over and over again. Like the old hymn:

*Tell me the old, old story of unseen things above,
Of Jesus and His glory, of Jesus and His love.
Tell me the story simply, as to a little child,
For I am weak and weary, and helpless and defiled.*

*Tell me the story softly, with earnest tones and grave;
Remember I'm the sinner whom Jesus came to save.
Tell me the story always, if you would really be,
In any time of trouble, a comforter to me.*

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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