

Joshua 24:14–28—Choose Whom You Will Serve

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It's been almost 2,000 years since that early morning on the first day of the week when the women approached the tomb of Jesus. They went to anoint His lifeless body with spices only to discover that there was no body.

The large stone that had once covered the tomb entrance had been rolled away and an angel appeared to the women and said, **“Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he has risen!”** (Matthew 28:5–6a)

We cannot overemphasize the importance of the resurrection of Jesus. Each year on Easter weekend we have a specific time set aside to remember and reflect upon the incredible work of God. He sent His Son to die on the cross and rise again three days later—that those who would believe in Him would have their *sin debt paid*—and receive the free gift of eternal life. Easter weekend gives those of us who are Christian an opportunity to renew our commitment to Jesus and be reminded of the important truths that we hold so dearly.

We are a forgetful people, so renewing our commitments in life is an important thing to do. Granted, some people are opposed to commitments of any kind, as if they were going to have some sort of allergic reaction to the commitment. They don't want to feel tied down or held back from doing what they want to do. But, as we will see in the Bible passage we are about to study today—following through on our commitments in life is important. And, *no* commitment is greater than the commitment that God calls His people to make to Him.

Take your Bible and turn with me to the book of Joshua, chapter 24—the last chapter of the book of Joshua. We as a church family are reading chronologically through the entire Bible this year and we've seen God's glory on full display! Each Sunday the sermon is from a passage that we have read the previous week. Joshua 24 was a part of yesterday's reading and it's an amazing passage because it shows us how the people of Israel renewed their commitment to God and it gives us a pattern through which God has called us, today, to a similar commitment.

The important truths in Joshua 24 make it one of the most important chapters in the Old Testament when it comes to understanding God's sovereign plan for His people. So, I'm going to begin reading verses 1–13 and then I'll pray.

Joshua 24:1–13

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. ² And Joshua said to all the people, 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. 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.

⁶ Then I brought your fathers out of Egypt, and you came to the sea. And the Egyptians pursued your fathers with chariots and horsemen to the Red Sea. ⁷ And when they cried to the LORD, he put darkness between you and the Egyptians and made the sea come upon them and cover them; and your eyes saw what I did in Egypt. And you lived in the wilderness a long time. ⁸ Then I brought you to the land of the Amorites, who lived on the other side of the Jordan. They fought with you, and I gave them into your hand, and you took possession of their land, and I destroyed them before you. ⁹ Then Balak the son of Zippor, king of Moab, arose and fought against Israel. And he sent and invited Balaam the son of Beor to curse you, ¹⁰ but I would not listen to Balaam. Indeed, he blessed you. So I delivered you out of his hand. ¹¹ And you went over the Jordan and came to Jericho, and the leaders of Jericho fought against you, and also the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. And I gave them into your hand. ¹² And I sent the hornet before you, which drove them out before you, the two kings of the Amorites; it was not by your sword or by your bow. ¹³ 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.

Father, God, time and time again you have proven your faithfulness your people. We praise you—for the mighty way in which you delivered the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt and brought them into the land promised hundreds of years prior to Abraham. We praise you for sending your Son, Jesus, to die in our place on the cross and rise again to secure for us eternal life. Thank you God that we who believe in Jesus need not fear death—for the sting of death has been removed. Help us now through the power of your Spirit and the truth of your Word to strength our commitment to following you in all that we do. It's through Jesus and by the Spirit we pray—Amen.

Joshua was called by God to lead the nation of Israel on their conquest to capture the Promised Land, following the death of Moses. For over two decades Joshua followed the Lord's guidance and led Israel in victory after victory. Now, in this last chapter of the book bearing his name, Joshua is nearing the end of his life.

We see in Joshua 24:1 that he gathered all the people of Israel together at a place called Shechem. Now, to most of us this is little more than a strange and hard-to-pronounce name, but Shechem was one of the most important locations for the nation of Israel. It was at Shechem that God had first appeared to Abraham when he entered the Promised Land for the first time almost 700 years earlier. Abraham then built his first altar to God there at Shechem in Genesis 12. Abraham's grandson, Jacob, stopped at Shechem to bury the foreign gods, the idols, his family had brought with them on the way back into the Promised Land in Genesis 35. Almost two decades earlier, in Joshua chapter 8, the nation of Israel stopped at Shechem to build an altar to the Lord and renew their commitment to following His commandments.

Now, in chapter 24, at the end of Joshua's life, a new generation was about to take the reigns of the nation. So, Joshua gathered the people of Israel at this important location to, once again, remind the people of all God had done for them and call them to renew their commitment to following the commands of God.

In verses 2–13 Joshua spoke the word of the Lord to the people as God reminded them of all He had done for Israel. It was GOD who called Abraham from his distant land and brought him to the very ground upon which they were now standing. It was GOD who sent plague after plague upon Egypt before He finally brought them out of the land. It was GOD who had parted the Red Sea and allowed Israel to cross over on dry ground—only to let the waters come crashing down on the pursuing Egyptian army. It was GOD who brought Israel into the Promised Land and leveled the fortified walls around Jericho.

God did *all* of this as an act of faithfulness to a covenant He had made *all* the way back in Genesis 15 with Abraham and his descendants. A covenant is a type of binding contract. In the case of God’s covenants, they are a life and death bond, initiated by God, which governs His relationship with people. The only way that we as creatures can be in a relationship with the Creator God is through His covenants.

God had made a covenant with Abraham and promised his descendants, the Israelites, *this* Promised Land, which He has now given them. Notice the pointed comment at the end of verse 12: God said, “it was not by your sword or by your bow.” Almost 20 times in verses 2–13 God said: “I gave...I delivered...I sent...I destroyed...I brought.” God did the work to fulfill His covenant promises to His people, because *only* God is the covenant-maker and covenant-keeper—and the same is true today!

John 3:16 is one of the most well known verses of the Bible for good reason. **“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”** It’s the same truth we see in Joshua 24—God does the work in saving His people!

We now live during a new era of God’s plan for His people. When we gathered on Good Friday, we celebrated the fact that Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross initiated a *new* covenant between God and His people. We now gather on Easter to celebrate the fact that Jesus is alive and we recount all that God has done for us—just like the Israelites at the beginning of Joshua 24 gathered at Shechem to be reminded of all that God had done for them.

But the fact that God does all the work in saving us does not absolve us of responsibility before Him. We see this clearly in verses 14–15 of Joshua 24. Look at the text.

Joshua 24:14–15

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.

God showed His covenant faithfulness to His people, now Joshua does three things with Israelites—three things that should serve as a guide for us as we respond to God’s covenant faithfulness in our own lives. The first thing Joshua did was to issue a call to covenant commitment from the people. So, our first point is...

I. Covenant Commitment Required

Verse 14 begins with two important transition words: “Now therefore.” Based on *all* God had done for the Israelites, He now required a commitment from them. And, He requires the same from us! We are now under a New Covenant—a new promise—but the commitment to God’s covenant required of us hasn’t changed. Joshua gives four imperative commands that define what covenant commitment in the Old Testament looked like, and we’ll see that each of these four imperatives are repeated for us—as followers of Jesus today—in the New Testament.

The first command in verse 14 is “fear the Lord.” It means to trust Him. It’s humbling yourself before HIM in reverence and *awe*. Solomon, the wisest man to ever live, set out on a journey to find the meaning of life and at the very end of his book he said this at the conclusion of his journey through life: **“Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.”** (Ecclesiastes 12:13)

The same command is repeated for us in the New Testament. 1 Peter 2:17 simply says “Fear God!” The Apostle Paul wrote to those of us who are recipients of God’s New Covenant promises in 2 Corinthians 7:1. **“Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God.”**

The basis for our commitment to God’s covenant begins with our reverent fear for Him. We stand in *awe* of Him because of *who* He is, *what* He has done, and *what* He *will* do. One of the best passages in the Old Testament that gives a basis for our reverent fear is Isaiah 45:5–7:

Isaiah 45:5–7

⁵ I am the LORD, I have no peer, there is no God but me. I arm you for battle, even though you do not recognize me. ⁶ I do this so people will recognize from east to west that there is no God but me; I am the LORD, I have no peer. ⁷ I am the one who forms light and creates darkness; the one who brings about peace and creates calamity. I am the LORD, who accomplishes all these things.—NET

We must fear the Lord as a basis for our own covenant commitment to Him.

The second imperative is also found in verse 14 of Joshua 24. The Israelites needed to “serve him.” The original Hebrew word translated “serve” in our English Bible carries with it the idea of “work” or even “worship.” Everyone serves or worships something. Even those who claim to *not* believe in God worship their own prideful independence. God has ingrained deep in our DNA a desire and need to worship and serve. Our worship is kind of like a garden hose stuck on full blast. You can aim the hose at your lawn, your car, or even the kids playing in the front yard but you can’t turn it off.

Joshua knows we will worship or serve something—so he tells the Israelites in verse 14, “*serve* God,” and then he tells them the manner in which they should serve, “in sincerity and in faithfulness.” Sincerity has to do with the depth of the commitment. Another way to think about it might be “wholeheartedly.” Their service must not be some sort of half-hearted, “show up on Sundays to punch a time card,” type of commitment.

Their service or worship of God must also be “in faithfulness.” Some of your English translations might

translate that word, “truth,” because that’s the root of the Hebrew word. We serve and worship God by consistently focusing on what is true. Again, it’s not just one day a week. It’s a life committed to covenant faithfulness.

In the New Testament, when Jesus was tempted by Satan in the wilderness he responded to the temptation by quoting from Deuteronomy 6 **“You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.”** (Matthew 4:10) Jesus equated service with worship! The Apostle Paul in Romans 12:11 would command the believers in Rome to “serve the Lord.”

We must serve the Lord—worship the Lord in sincerity and in faithfulness. Perhaps you consider yourself a Christian, but the only time you gather with the church to worship is on Easter Sunday. Perhaps you consider yourself a Christian, but “church” is something you go to a few times a month—as an add-on to your normal routine of life. First, let me say we are glad you are here! But, let me also tell you that type of “service”—that type of “a commitment”—is inconsistent with the pattern we see of believers in the New Testament. Gathering as the church and serving one another in the church was an integral part of daily life in the early church. May we be faithful and sincere in our worship and service!

The third imperative is in the middle of verse 14 is “put away.” “Put away the gods that your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt.” Again, service is equated with worship. The command was to “put away”—remove from their midst any of the false gods (little “g”) that they had stashed around their houses. They were to remove idol worship from their families—as Jacob did at Shechem years earlier.

We see a similar turning and “putting away” of idols in 1 Thessalonians 1:9–10. Paul said that the Thessalonians **“...turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.”**

Most of us, when we read this, think of little figures or things that people in other cultures still bow down to and worship around the world today—perhaps even primitive. But anything that you elevate to a position of importance in your life above God is an idol. Where you invest your time or spend your resources might be a good indicator of who or what rules your life. Even *good things* can become idols in your life when you make them a *GOD thing*: kids, family, jobs, financial stability—your desire for a spouse—hobbies. None of those things are inherently bad, but they can become an idol that supplants the worship of God in your life.

At the end of Joshua 24:14, Joshua reiterated his second imperative to *serve* the *LORD*. Then we see the fourth and final imperative near the beginning of verse 15: “choose this day whom you will serve.” Again, it has to do with service—but this time Joshua commands the people to make a choice! Commitment to God’s covenant-promises requires a personal decision! Joshua began verse 15 by saying, “if it is evil in your eyes to serve the Lord”—then you must choose. Basically, this means, “if you think it’s strange, or if you have no desire to serve the Lord.”—then you *must decide*.

Jesus would later say in Matthew 6:24 **“No one can serve two masters...”** Remember that new covenant promise God has now given us in John 3:16? He gave his only Son. God did the work, but there’s a personal decision involved: **“...that whoever believes in him should not perish.”**

Entering into the New Covenant requires a decision. If you want to be a part of God’s New Covenant

people—the church—and be forgiven of your sin, then you *must believe in Jesus*. *Have you believed* in the crucified, risen Savior? There is no better time than right now, Easter Sunday, to believe in Jesus and move from death to life!

If you have believed—and you are a part of God’s New Covenant—the Covenant Commitment Required still means a continual, daily choice on your part. In Colossians 3, Paul describes this daily choice that we must all make. Paul said we must continually put away the sins of the flesh—anger, wrath, malice, sexual immorality, impurity. Instead, we must *put on*, as God’s chosen ones—compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness. *If* you are a part of God’s covenant people, then you must strive to put off the old way of life. *You* can’t live the way you use to live because you aren’t who you used to be!

Notice, now, at the end of verse 15, as a good, godly leader, Joshua wasn’t calling the people to do something that he was unwilling to do. He basically said, “you can do what you want, But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.” Joshua wanted them to know—regardless of their decision—his family would serve the Lord!

It is an excellent verse to hang on the wall of your home or put on your coffee mug, but does it truly reflect your covenant commitment ...that God requires? Fathers, let me speak to you for just a moment. God has given you the primary task of being the spiritual leader in your home. Can you say what Joshua said, “as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord?” Take the lead! Read the Bible with your family. Pray together. Spend time talking about the sermon on Sunday afternoon over lunch. Do what ever you can to lead your family to serve and worship the Lord.

Now, look at the reply of the people in Joshua 24:16.

Joshua 24:16–21

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.

Our first main point was Covenant Commitment Required. Here we see our second main point:

II. Covenant Commitment Reality (16–21)

In verse 16 the people seemed to be shocked that Joshua would even consider that they would forsake the Lord. They strongly affirmed what God had done in verse 17–18 and vowed to serve Him!

At first glance, it seems like a wonderful response from the people—then we come to verse 19: **“But Joshua said to the people, ‘You are not able to serve the Lord...’”** *Way to encourage the people Joshua!* He called them to serve the Lord, they promised they *would* serve the Lord, and then Joshua tells them they are not able!

Perhaps Joshua sensed insincerity in their reply or perhaps he just remembered the promise God had made to Moses back in Deuteronomy 31, that the people would not obey! But the core reason for his reply is because he knew the people and he knew God. Look right there in the middle of verse 19: **“...for he [God] is a holy God. He is a jealous God...”**

Joshua knew that God is holy—and that he cannot be in relationship with anything that is not holy. He also knew that God is a jealous God. Often we think of jealousy as a bad thing because it usually becomes a bad thing when it’s mixed with our sin nature. Since God had no sin His jealousy is actually a good thing. God is jealous for His holy name and He is jealous for the worship of His people. He will not share his glory with any other!

Joshua knew the high standard of God—and that sinful people cannot meet His high standard. Israel had a complete inability to conquer the Promised Land—a complete inability to receive the covenant promise apart from the divine work of God. They also had a complete inability to maintain their covenant commitment on their own. The reality of their covenant commitment is that they were not able to receive the covenant promise or maintain the covenant promises on their own—and that’s the core reality of our covenant commitment today.

Every person is born a sinner—unable to save ourselves. Left to our own we are completely incapable of engaging God in a covenant relationship. The apostle Paul said in Romans 8 that the sinful mind of man is hostile to God—it does not submit to God’s perfect standard—nor can it do so. The reality of our covenant commitment is: *we are not able to follow God.*

Well then, what do we do? We remember that God is the one who saves. God gave his only son! Romans 8:3 says it this way, **“For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering.”** (NIV)

God has done what we could not do! That is what we celebrate on Good Friday and Easter Sunday: God sending his Son, that whoever would believe in Him, would now become heirs of the new covenant promises.

Just as we could not bring ourselves into a right relationship with God apart from His divine work, we also cannot maintain our covenant commitment apart from Him! It’s why we sang that last song right before the sermon, “Hallelujah, All I have is Christ—for the strength to follow your commands could never come from me!”

Paul wrote in 1 Timothy 1:12 **“I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service.”** Our strength to serve God can only come from Him. He gives us strength!

So, what about that little statement at the end of Joshua 24:19? **“...he will not forgive your**

transgressions or your sins.” This statement was aimed specifically at Israel in the Old Testament. God had warned the people that, if they did not obey, they would be judged and removed from the land. Those who worshiped or served God lightly, those who turned away from Him deliberately to serve idols, would be judged because of their sin. Which is exactly what Joshua goes on to explain in verse 20. *If* they did not follow through on their commitment to serve God wholeheartedly then God would know and He would judge them.

Perhaps you think Jesus died for everyone and *if* you just live a good life you’ll go to heaven. That is not what the Bible teaches. You must personally believe in Jesus and allow him to take you from death to life. That’s the only way that your transgressions and sins can be forgiven.

This brings us to the last section we are going to look at in Joshua 24 this morning: Verses 22–28.

Joshua 24:22–28

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.

Our third and final point from this last section is where we see the...

III. Covenant Commitment Renewed (22–28)

After the people insisted that they would be faithful to serve the Lord, Joshua acknowledged that they would stand as witnesses against themselves. In other words, they were about to sign on the dotted line and they would be liable for the debt owed. When the people agreed to the terms in verse 24, Joshua then made a covenant with the people in verse 25. This was the second covenant renewal that Joshua made with the people of Israel when He reminded them of the commands of God can called them to obedience.

It is important today for us to renew our covenant commitments. Covenant renewal can take many different forms today. Marriage is one of the most common covenant commitments. Renewing our marriage covenant can be as simple as a husband stopping on his way home from work to take his wife flowers—to reaffirm his love for her. Perhaps it’s even a formal vow renewal ceremony where a husband and wife reaffirm their covenant commitment.

In a way, Easter is a covenant renewal time. We celebrate the foundational truths of the new covenant in Jesus and call one another to reaffirm our commitment to following Him. As members of the local assembly here at Geist, we covenant together with one another through membership to love one another,

to encourage one another, and to hold one another accountable in living the Christian life. Lord willing, we will be renewing our covenant membership with one another later this year.

But the primary way we renew our commitment to the New Covenant today is by baptism and communion. The bread and the cup of the communion table is a God-ordained, tangible way in which we proclaim the work of Jesus in our lives and affirm our commitment to following him. Baptism is commanded by Jesus for his followers as a symbol of covenant commitment and renewal.

Today, on Easter Sunday, 2016, I want to give you two ways you can renew your covenant commitment and then a single warning.

(1) Renew your covenant commitment by remembering the work God has done for you through His Son, Jesus. The first step is being here this morning—hearing the truth of Easter again—worshiping through the singing and reading of the Word. Perhaps the next step is obeying the example and command of Jesus to be baptized. Each day this week, read the Word of God so that you are reminded of God's Work.

(2) Renew your covenant commitment by reaffirming your devotion to live out the Christian life together, both within the church and outside of the church. It is a necessary and normal part of the Christian life to do life in the context of the local church. Here's what the writer to the Hebrews said,

Hebrews 12:1–2

¹ Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, ² looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

Our strength comes from the Lord! We dare not trust the sweetest frame, but wholly trust in Jesus name! Now the warning...

The nation of Israel did, in fact, serve the Lord and remain faithful to Him—for the most part—for one generation. But the book of Judges 2:10 tells us that **"...there arose another generation after them who did not know the LORD or the work that he had done for Israel."**

One generation removed from Joshua and the nation crumbled into sin—*because they failed to remember* the work of GOD and they *failed to reaffirm* their devotion to live for Him! They failed to renew their covenant commitment before God. May the same not be said of our generation! If you're tempted to think "it would never happen on my watch!" consider Romans 12:3. **"Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you."**

TODAY—renew your covenant commitment by remembering the work God has done for you through His Son, Jesus. And by reaffirming your devotion to live out the Christian life together.

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