

JOSHUA

Lesson 27 - Chapter 24 Conclusion (End of Book)

We'll finish up the book of Joshua today. But before we get there we'll look at a few more of the inspiring, foundational and rather heavy-duty God-principles that comprise the last chapter of this book. I suspect we could spend several more weeks in this lone chapter as I told you before that some scholars have made a goodly portion of their careers studying and reporting on Joshua 24.

We were examining the 15th to 20th verses of this 24th and final chapter when we ended last time. This was the matter whereby Joshua asked the people which god they intended to serve. And when they said they would serve Yehoveh, Joshua thought about their answer and said essentially, "Sorry but you can't serve God".

Let's re-read a few verses to get our bearings and find out why Joshua would provide such a surprising and negative retort.

RE-READ JOSHUA CHAPTER 24: 15 - 20

As we worked our way through this difficult but enlightening passage we discovered that an ironic problem of cosmic proportions was put before Israel for their consideration and that when read casually it sounds like crazy-making words, because it also sounds like an absolute divine insistence for the impossible to happen. And simply stated the problem is this: God demands that those who call themselves by His name (those who say that they are part of His people) serve Him with fullest devotion and perfection. But since no man is even capable of such devotion or perfection (something that YHWH well understands) then what the Lord demands of Israel they cannot do; so Joshua tells Israel in verse 19: "You cannot serve Yehoveh". Do you see this? God says, "I want you to do what you cannot do, and if you don't then you will suffer curses and destruction". What are we to think of such a thing? What are we to think of such a God that would demand the contradictory? It's no wonder that we find Israel's response almost kindergarten in nature, and really rather hollow; this was because they couldn't comprehend the depth of the question the Lord, through Joshua, asked of them.

The level of devotion and service that God demands of His own is total and without flaw. That is because He is holy and is Himself perfect and therefore can accept no less from His subjects or it would be defilement towards Him.

You see it was rather easy for Israel to serve these false gods that had infiltrated their camp.

Make a little statue out of wood or stone, drip some oil on them, bow towards them, pray to them, and lay fine food before them and these non-gods seemed perfectly happy. Which of these idols would tell you that you're not worshipping them properly? It was somewhat different as concerned dealing with the Almighty God who created all things, YHWH.

The very first man ever created failed in this devotion to his Creator. Abraham couldn't do it. Even Moses couldn't achieve the required level of perfection of service to God therefore YHWH punished him by not allowing him to enter into the Promised Land. If Adam, Abraham and Moses couldn't serve the Lord properly, how could a common Hebrew farmer or herdsman expect to do such a thing? Answer? Joshua says you can't. On the other hand God expects it of you. And you should expect of yourself.

In case it hasn't struck you, it is this same absurd sounding proposition that is the reason that Yeshua our Messiah was necessary AND there is no way that He could have been a mere man; because no mere man was even remotely capable of perfect service to the Creator. As a result of sin all men are doomed to this failure. And in a sense so are all Believers. Even more aggravating is that as long as the pagans (those who have never known God) leave Israel alone, God will leave them alone; but Israel catches no such break from the Lord. In fact another cosmic irony is that the people who God separates out and elects as His chosen people will be **more** scrutinized and expected to achieve a **higher** standard than those who He has not chosen. Pagans who follow other gods will not necessarily have evil dumped on their heads, but if Israel fails as God's chosen people, they will.

So here we have in Joshua the dynamic established that requires nothing less than for the Lord to come Himself to solve the insolvable dilemma that man has caused and cannot cure; but also one by which God will accept no compromise.

Continuing that same thought, when backing up to verse 15 we find one of the more important words (that really amounts to a self contained concept) in this chapter; the word is "choose". Choose inherently implies free will. Choosing is only possible when there is a clear distinction between two or more possibilities and the liberty is available to make that choice. The choice presented to Israel is to choose the God of Israel or to choose other gods. While the question seems somewhat benign, in fact it is the Chinese Fingers of all questions that will ever be put before Israel, or any of us for that matter. You know what Chinese Fingers are, right? It is this simple little device in which you can easily insert your fingers (one finger from each hand usually), but a problem comes when you try to extract your fingers from this webbed tube. When you try to take your fingers out of this device, it grabs hold and won't let you. The harder you pull the tighter the Chinese fingers grip and no amount of human strength or thrashing about releases you. You're trapped and I've watched people virtually panic when they realize their predicament.

The moral of this is one that the typical Christian is startled to hear: to choose to serve the Lord is dangerous and the consequences serious. To choose to serve YHWH means you've stuck your digits into the infinitely powerful Chinese Fingers of the God of the Universe. Once you're in getting out is not only difficult but it will also certainly mean your destruction in order to succeed. This is what was behind Joshua's question and Israel just didn't get it; so they

answered in a childlike ignorance having little idea of what this choice that they had made “before God” (as is stated they were doing in verse 1) meant and what the repercussions of their choice (either way) would be.

There is yet another mighty principle that is interwoven throughout this marvelous theological essay that is Joshua 24: it is that as little chance as we have of succeeding, God’s Believers are to constantly strive to emulate God in every way. God is merciful, thus we are to show mercy. God is loving, thus we are to show love. God is patient, faithful and slow to anger, therefore we should demonstrate those same attributes. The Lord has established His justice, and we are to establish His justice. God chose Israel from His free will to be His people; so Israel is free to choose Yehoveh (or not) from their free will to be their God.

Yeshua chose to give His life for ours from His own free will; now we are free to choose to give our lives to Him (or not) from our own free will. But here’s the thing: everything changes when we are confronted with that choice. When Joshua challenged Israel with this question, Israel was in the midst of renewing their commitment to the Covenant of Moses; this question was at the heart of that renewal process there at Shechem. When we finally understand that there IS a choice, and we choose NOT to give our lives to Him, then the only life we’ll ever have is this oh-so-short physical earthly one followed by a long period of torment and regret, and then judgment. But when we choose TO give our lives to Him then we’ll live as He lives.....eternally....in Paradise.

Even by our acceptance of God’s Son we cannot escape so easily from the problem of the Chinese Fingers anymore than did Israel here at Shechem. You see the issue is that those who have never known God are generally permitted by His will to have as good a life as they can make on their own (the main exception to that being those who might come against God’s people and then all bets are off!). Those who we call pagans have never experienced the Lord; they have never received His blessings, laid down in His rest, been showered in His shalom. They have not known Him so they have not been initiated into the Kingdom of God nor are they familiar with the Word of God, His laws and commands, or the need for a Messiah. Of these people practically nothing is expected by the Lord. In fact a number of passages in both the Old and New Testaments explain that it’s perfectly natural for pagans to worship the sun and the moon and the stars as their gods, because the Father put those objects in the sky for such a purpose.

But.....those who know God, and know His laws and commands, and are experiencing His love and grace; (in Joshua’s era) those Israelites who watched the Lord part the Red Sea, rain food from the sky and burst forth water from boulders to sustain them; then cross a dammed up Jordan and marvel as the Father destroyed vast enemy armies ahead of them and finally gave them rest in their own land....these people who the Lord redeemed (and by definition knew Him) agreed that they had obligations to Him. And their obligations all centered around serving Him because that is precisely what they were set apart to do. And that, dear friends, is what all Believers in Yeshua our Messiah, Jesus Christ, were chosen by Him to do.....serve Him. You, me, gentiles, Jews, all Disciples of Yeshua were elected with a purpose to serve the Lord with unwavering devotion and 100% perfection.

Naturally we'll never achieve that on this side of heaven. Nonetheless that is what we are to strive for until our lungs suck in that last breath of air. God gave Israel the Torah in order to know what perfect service looked like (how else are they or we to know?); and then He also gave them a sacrificial system so that they could be forgiven when they inevitably failed. But with each failure, a new sacrifice was needed. With each failure, their iniquities piled up and were passed on to the next generation to bear. With every careless act and imperfection and divided devotion another innocent animal lost its life.

With Yeshua came the last sacrifice needed; the perfect one with perfect devotion. With Yeshua every past failure could be forgiven, and every future failure atoned for in advance. The cosmic problem set before Israel in this chapter of Joshua was finally solved 1300 years after the problem was posed. We don't stop failing in our service to God just because we're saved; but we're supposed to try. Yes it's exhausting, however its not physical rest that was promised but spiritual and eternal. Yes we can get disappointed in the failures of ourselves and others who are our Christian leaders, our Messianic friends, our Believing families (tears and bitterness are normal in these earthly shells). But we can know with joy that this will all last only a little while, then we will experience eternal shalom (peace and well being) in God's presence.

As wonderful as all this is, what happens to those who have been redeemed and have known God, but inexplicably choose to serve another master instead of Yehoveh? Does the Lord wink and nod and look the other way? Does Israel, as God's people, get the equivalent of a short time-out in their rooms for breaking faith with the Lord?

Verse 20 answers that awful question like this: ***Joshua 24:20 If you abandon ADONAI and serve foreign gods, he will turn, doing you harm and destroying you after he has done you good.***

I know that some of you who are listening believe that this situation and God-principle no longer exists and that all a follower of God can ever expect from Him is goodness and mercy no matter what our choices are. And indeed for so long as you are His, and safely gripped within those heavenly Chinese Fingers at your own choice, I have no doubt that this is so. But free will and choice did not end for God's people after their redemption from Egypt, nor after decades and decades of they're experiencing the Lord first hand in the Wilderness and then in Canaan. I see no evidence that it is any different in our current era and we are cautioned about this over and over by Jesus and His Apostles. Those who have known God and then renounce Him; those who determine to extract themselves from His Kingdom must be, without doubt, the most miserable people on this earth. And this is because the God of Israel says He will not give you up without a fight. And this fight will mean a lot of pain for you. He will pursue you; He will discipline and chastise you if you think to change your loyalties to another master.....because you are so valuable to Him. He will NEVER allow another human being or any creature or any spirit being to take you from His hand. But according to Joshua 24 and according to the parable of the seeds in Luke 8, by your own free will you can choose the way of destruction after you've chosen the way of His goodness for a while.

How could any rational person make such a crazy choice, we might ask? Well how could any

Israelite who personally witnessed God's spectacular and visible miracles choose to serve another and lesser god? Yet this was no rhetorical question the Lord asked of Israel through Joshua when He wanted to know whom they'd serve. Thousands of Israelites were at that very moment secretly harboring Canaanite idols in their homes and Mystery Babylon gods and goddesses in their hearts; and in a few short years thousands more would openly devote themselves to El, Asherah, Ba'al and Astarte. We will begin reading about this shockingly rapid decline of Israel into rampant idolatry in the book of Judges.

Let's re-read some more of Joshua 24.

RE-READ JOSHUA 24:21-28

After Joshua explains that IF Israel serves ANY foreign gods, thereby breaking faith with the Lord, there will be severe penalties (the worst of which is the reversal of their salvation history) place upon them by God. He WILL harm them, He will destroy them. But the people respond even more firmly that they will NOT forsake Yehoveh and serve foreign gods.

What is troubling is what they did NOT say. They did NOT say that they would forsake foreign gods. They did NOT agree to bury (so to speak) their idols and be rid of them. Rather they only agreed not to abandon the Lord God in favor of other gods. In their minds this mean they could have other gods as long as they also continued to worship Yehoveh. And here is the problem that Israel has faced for the entire term of existence, and here is the problem for which they have suffered at God's hand greatly.

And fellow Believers, this is what we suffer from as well.

Verse 22 says something that seems innocuous to most moderns, but it had a significant meaning to the ancients. Y'hoshua now accepts Israel's answer that it will serve God (after he had earlier rejected the same answer), but then adds a warning: "You are witnesses against yourselves....."

I have taught in earlier lessons that the nature of what a witness is and what a witness does is quite different in Western culture and law than it was in Hebrew culture and the Law of Moses. For us a witness is merely someone who can testify to some aspect of a case. Their only obligation is to be truthful.

But a witness in Israel was also an accuser, a prosecutor, and if the offense required the death penalty then they had to be the ones who began the execution process (they were the first to throw a stone in a stoning, and then the remainder of the community followed suit). So what Joshua is assuming is the role of a judge and swearing in Israel as witnesses against themselves. Joshua is telling Israel (and they fully understand) that as witnesses against themselves if they should commit idolatry (which according to the law requires the death penalty for conviction), they will be their own accusers, own prosecutors, and they will execute themselves (so to speak). That is they will be the cause of their own destruction. To commit idolatry is to commit suicide essentially.

They agree to these terms and so in verse 25 Joshua commands them one last time to get rid of those god idols they have hidden in their tents and in their hearts, and to serve ONLY the God of Israel. Israel again asserts that she fully understands her vow, and the seriousness of her obligation to Yehoveh, and what the consequences for failure might be. They pledge to “shema” the Lord; that means they pledge not only to hear YHWH but also to obey what they hear.

Every new covenant or renewal of an existing covenant necessarily involves making a vow; now that the people have publicly vowed to serve the Lord, forsake other gods, and to listen to the Lord and obey whatever He tells them, the process is completed. Their promise to the Lord and His to them is in effect. And to memorialize that covenant renewal Joshua erects a standing stone as a witness to all that happened.

This second half of verse 26 is significantly problematic in a number of ways. First is this matter of the standing stone placed under the big oak tree (likely the same place that Jacob buried his clans’ idols). The Hebrew word for what we call a standing stone in English is **eben gadol**; it means great stone. It is essentially synonymous with another Hebrew word **masseboth** although there are very minor differences. These are both ceremonial stones used within a religious context. They were used among pagans to mark holy sites and at times to honor several of their gods. They were also symbolic of an appearance of a god or goddess at that spot or they were to commemorate a historically important act of a deity. Usually they were set up in a high place (a hill or mound), and whenever possible under a tree. The use of standing stones and trees was as central common to the worship practices among the pagans as is Christians sitting in pews, listening to a Pastor speak from a raised pulpit, while standing under a wooden cross.

Yet was Joshua and Israel’s sincere effort to erect a stone monument to that special moment there at Shechem the proper thing to do? Obviously they thought it was. We’ll find all throughout Israel’s history this act of commemorating their commitment to God by means of a stone monument placed under a large tree.

You can put whipped cream on a pile of dirt, but it’s still dirt. The tree had a meaning that Israel knew about; they just chose to ignore it and feel that since they didn’t necessarily attach the same meaning that it was fine to employ trees in their religious practices. Among the pagans the tree was a symbol for the wife of El, Asherah. Asherah was the mother god, and trees symbolized new life (an element of fertility). Thus groves of trees that were used in pagan shrines were also called in Hebrew “Asherah”. So Asherah in the Bible is BOTH the formal name of El’s wife and the word used for sacred groves of trees. Point being this was not lost on the Hebrews. They full well knew the meaning of employing a tree on a hill in a religious ceremony and who was being honored. Even if they didn’t necessarily overtly intend to honor a pagan goddess, all who were not Hebrews took it that way. But have no doubt that the Israelites were also hedging their bets. By worshipping the Lord God using practices and methods that the other gods enjoyed, you were killing two birds with one stone and also not offending your pagan neighbors. After all, there was always that chance that those Canaanite gods were still around and there was no need to aggravate them. The problem is, they were violating the letter and spirit of the Torah.

CJB Leviticus 26:1 *"You are not to make yourselves any idols, erect a carved statue or a standing-stone, or place any carved stone anywhere in your land in order to bow down to it. I am ADONAI your God.*

Let me repeat this verse adding in a couple of Hebrew words to replace their English translations to help you understand just how crystal clear this commandment of God is to avoid using stones as monuments to Him.

"You are not to make yourselves any idols, erect a carved statue or a ***masseboth***, or place any ***eben (gadol)*** anywhere in your land in order to bow down to it. I am Yehoveh your God."

No ***masseboth***, no ***eben***. Both terms commonly used to convey using a stone to mark a religious or holy site were employed in this well known command so that there could be no doubt; and the biblical writers who wrote in later times came down hard on this continued practice by Israel of using religious standing stones placed under sacred trees.

There is equally no doubt that Israel constantly used stones and trees in a misguided attempt to please God. They were used unthinkingly and innocently because their use was so traditional in Middle Eastern cultures. But it was wrong. And such seemingly innocent though sincere acts invariably lead baby-step-by-baby-step to more careless and serious trespasses against the Lord's commands and until God justly punishes the violators. Shock and surprise is often their first reaction when they feel God's wrath.

I greatly fear that we Believers are such careless people today in our frivolous attempts to supposedly honor Yehoveh when in fact we are far more interested in making a personal statement or pleasing ourselves. We, as did Israel, still think we can take a forbidden pagan practice and on our own accord merely attach a different meaning to it, and then offer it to the Lord and expect Him to be pleased. It's one thing for Yehoveh to ordain a practice in the Torah that is similar to those used by pagans who do not worship Him and attach a different and heavenly meaning to it; it's quite another to think that we have such authority to do the same.

Another problematic issue in verse 26 is where it says that the standing stone was placed under a tree, and this was next to the "sanctuary of Yehoveh". The obvious question is: did the Tabernacle get moved from Shiloh to Shechem for a time? Or as is more often believed did the Ark of the Covenant get transported to Shechem for this ceremony and then was returned to Shiloh?

As difficult as either of those possible solutions is there is yet another possibility that's perhaps even more troubling. It is known that in the same area there was a pagan sanctuary to the god Ba'al. It was operated by the Canaanite residents of Shechem and called Ba'al-Berith (or covenant of Ba'al). It is just possible that the Israelites took over this sanctuary and converted it to a sanctuary to Yehoveh. For an enemy (in this case Israel) to capture a sanctuary to a certain god that belonged to their opponent, and then re-dedicate that sanctuary to a different god (one of their gods) was completely common and understood as normal operating

procedure. That may well be what happened here. Naturally it would seem to have been a wrong thing for Joshua and Israel to do, but just like the trees and standing stones they didn't see it that way.

We'll find this exact thing happening during the time of the Maccabees when the Temple of God in Jerusalem was captured by Syria, and then it was converted to a sanctuary to Zeus. When Israel recaptured it (in an event that is memorialized by the holiday Hannukah) they re-dedicated to Yehoveh.

I just spent some time in Spain, and visited some of the great cities of the Spanish southlands. There were some magnificent Cathedrals at the center of each of these cities. But in a couple of cases these enormous grand cathedrals were nothing more than converted mosques and palaces of the Muslim rulers who had conquered most of Spain in the 7th century AD and then controlled it for over 200 years. When Christians retook Spain (more specifically it was the Catholic Church who represented Christianity), then rather than tear down these magnificent houses of worship and palaces of the Muslims, the church simply took them as is and rededicated them to the Christian God.

In England today it is common for Muslims to purchase long defunct churches and rededicate them to Allah as mosques; we have exactly the same thing going on in the USA as we speak.

So this concept of converting a sanctuary of worship dedicated to one god into a place of worship to a different god was not only usual thousands of years ago it remains so to this day even in the West. And since it is unthinkable to me that Joshua would have set the Ark of the Covenant in front of the huge crowd of Israelite leaders there at Shechem (which would have meant instant death to all who viewed it), I suspect that the Ark was either brought to the former sanctuary of Ba'al and put behind a curtain there in a more or less proper manner, or it wasn't brought at all (and it remained in Shiloh at the Tabernacle). Therefore what would have happened is the Ba'al Berith Sanctuary was simply rededicated to the name of Yehoveh (and thereby called The Sanctuary of Yehoveh) and thus the reason for this statement at the end of verse 26.

While I think that is the most likely possibility I readily admit this cannot be proved; but I assure you that I am hardly alone in thinking this the most likely scenario.

RE-READ JOSHUA 24:29 – end

Joshua dies at 110 years of age. Do not at all think that this means precisely 110 years NOR that he died on his 110th birthday. He might have been a few months shy of 110 or even a few months older. 110 is a significant number because down in Egypt 110 was seen among the Egyptians as the symbolic age of having lived an extraordinary lifespan. However we also saw that Moses died at 120 years of age; that is the number of years that God says in Torah is man's symbolic age of blessed and fullest life span. The difference between the two in life spans also makes it clear that Joshua had not attained Moses' status in God's eyes, though he was just a notch below.

We also find a very significant honor bestowed upon Y'hoshua at his death that had not been given to him during his life; he was called a Servant of Yehoveh. This was a title that belonged supremely to Moses and it is a rare one. When Joshua was Moses' assistant and when he finally took over the leadership role of Israel upon Moses' death, Joshua was given the title of the Servant of Moses. Only now, as an epitaph, is the title Servant of Yehoveh transferred to Joshua.

The influence of Joshua upon Israel was enormous. His example of leadership is unmatched in the Old Testament. In reality the later story of King Solomon is the story of an anti-Joshua, an example of the worst kind of leadership. Joshua poured his life out into his people and into preparing the next generation of leaders. The passage in verse 31 makes it clear that immediately following his death Israel was well governed by those he had mentored and as a result Israel served the Lord in a manner that seems to have pleased Him.

Although we now get a quick note that the remains of Joseph (that had been brought with them on their exodus from Egypt) were buried at Shechem this is really an anachronistic statement; that is the statement makes it appear that Joseph was buried only now when Joshua died. Rather his internment with his ancestors would have been one of the very first acts of the leaders of Israel upon arriving in the Promised Land. It's only that the editor of Joshua has noticed that to this point this wonderfully important figure of Israel's salvation history has not had the announcement of his proper burial posted; and so he chose this spot to mention it.

After Joshua died the current High Priest, Eleazar, passed away (and we don't know exactly how long after Joshua Eleazar died) and Pinchas was now the new High Priest of Israel. It is appropriate for us to close the book on this golden era of conquest and obedience of God's people on this note, because now we have both the secular and the religious leaders of the conquest era in their graves.

The next historical era of Israel is, unfortunately, not so glorious as the one just ended. It is called the era of the Judges or *shofetim*, and there was no Joshua-like figure to guide Israel. The priesthood was supposed to function in that matter to a degree, and each tribal leader was to emulate Joshua but they did not. Rather each did what was best in their own eyes and Israel would pay a terrible price for it.

We'll begin the Book of Judges next time.