

“We Will Serve the LORD”

The eighty-eighth in a series: “I Will be Your God and You Will Be My People.”

Texts: Joshua 24:1-33; Romans 10:4-17

Joshua knows that he is soon to die. But before he goes to be with the LORD, there is one very important thing he must yet do. As Israel’s covenant mediator, Joshua must call the people of Israel to assemble at Shechem, the ancient home of Abraham and Jacob and that place where the entire nation of Israel renewed their covenant with YHWH (Joshua 8:30-35) shortly after they entered the land of promise. Since the nation of Israel was established at Mount Sinai as a covenant community, Israel must renew their covenant with YHWH before the covenant mediator dies. Joshua will remind all Israel of what the LORD has done for them, before the people swear their oath of covenant allegiance to YHWH with the words “we will serve the LORD.” Joshua knows that his impending death means that Israel will soon enter a new chapter in redemptive history. This covenant renewal ceremony will be a fitting end to the life of a man who has faithfully served the LORD and led his people into the land of promise.

We conclude our time in the Book of Joshua. Lord willing, next Sunday, we will turn to the Book of Judges. As we will see, Israel’s situation changes greatly as slowly but surely the people begin to drift away from the LORD and begin to do what is evil in his sight (Judges 2:11). But even as a new chapter in the redemptive drama is soon to unfold, the present chapter in Israel must come to an end. Throughout our study of Joshua we have followed the people of Israel from those days in which they were still camped on the plains of Moab across the Jordan River from Canaan until that time when they finally conquered the land of Canaan and drove out the Canaanites. Throughout this period in Israel’s history, Joshua has been the covenant mediator, Israel’s leader and the general of the army. As I have pointed out, Joshua is a true biblical hero in every sense of the word. Other than one instance in his youth when he was mildly rebuked by Moses (Numbers 11:28), everything else in the narrative depicts Joshua as a man of great faith, a strong and wise leader and a brilliant and courageous general. But Joshua’s impending death means that great changes lie ahead for God’s people—and it falls to Joshua to prepare them for what will come to pass. That means renewing the covenant.

As we saw last time, Joshua summoned the leaders of Israel to remind them of blessing-curse structure of the covenant that YHWH had made with them at Mount Sinai. Joshua pointed out to these men that their greatest fear should be that future generations of Israel would become enamored with pagan religions and that their children would marry outside the faith of Israel. The task of driving out the Canaanites from the fringes of the promised land must be completed so that these pagans cannot exercise any influence upon Israel. The leaders of the nation must be fully aware of severity of the covenant curse. Just as Israel took possession of the land, so too Israel would be cast from the land should the people turn their backs on YHWH and worship and serve other “gods.” YHWH is a jealous God and although he is long-suffering and loves his people, he will not tolerate the people of Israel worshipping and serving other “gods.” And yet, sadly, this is exactly what will happen in Israel in the not too distant future.

So, as we turn to the final chapter of the Book of Joshua, there are several things worth noting before we go through the passage.

The entire chapter is structured along the lines of a covenant renewal ceremony.¹ This clearly places the writing of Joshua back in the days of the late second millennium B.C. (the traditional dating) and undercuts the argument of many critical scholars that much of this material is legendary and was written hundreds of years after the time Israel supposedly entered the land. This covenant renewal structure also explains why in this chapter Joshua spends so much time reviewing the history of God's covenantal dealings with his people beginning as far back as Abraham's father, as well as explaining why Joshua calls for the people to ratify God's covenant promise with an affirmation of their intention to serve the LORD.

The first thirteen verses of Joshua 24 serve two purposes. One is that in a covenant renewal document the two parties to the covenant are identified in the preamble to the treaty—in this case, YHWH (the great king) makes a covenant with his vassal (subjects), the people of Israel. There is also a prologue in which the history of dealings between the two parties is spelled out in some detail.² Therefore, when Joshua presides over the covenant renewal ceremony, he begins by reminding Israel that their ties to this land go all the way back to Terah the father of Abraham. This was back in that day when Israel's own ancestors worshiped false Gods and lived in Ur of the Chaldees. The recitation of the historical record which opens the covenant renewal ceremony is intended to remind the people of Israel that from beginning to end, their possession of the land is a result of God's gracious favor towards them, and is not the result of Israel's own accomplishments as a people. All that they currently possess (the land, the prosperity, the rest and the peace) is a free gift from a gracious God.

The covenant renewal ceremony unfolds as follows in verse 1. "*Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel.*" Unlike Joshua's farewell speech to the leaders of Israel recorded in the previous chapter, in this instance we read Joshua summoned the all people of Israel to Shechem. This is where the entire nation renewed the covenant earlier on the slopes of Mount Ebal shortly after they entered the land. Shechem is also mentioned in Genesis 12:6-7 as the same place where God appeared to Abraham and promised him this very land. Now that four centuries have passed, here are the people of Israel in the very same place where God appeared to Abraham, renewing their covenant with YHWH. Only this time, Israel possesses the land which God had promised to Abraham. God has fulfilled all of his promises. Not one of them failed.

We also learn in verse 1 that the people of Israel "*presented themselves before God.*" More than likely, this means that the ark of the covenant had been moved from Shiloh to Shechem for the covenant renewal ceremony, since the ark symbolized the presence of the LORD.³ But this act of the people "presenting themselves to the LORD" also indicates that there are major changes coming in Israel. The only other time this phrase is used prior to this was in Exodus 19:17, when the people presented themselves before the LORD at Mount Sinai to ratify the covenant God was about to make with them. This act of "presenting themselves to the LORD" clearly constitutes an act of worship on the part of Israel. But it also associates the people with that covenant made earlier with Israel at Mount Sinai, which they are about to renew here at Shechem. Furthermore, the fact that Joshua summons the elders, heads, judges and officers (and not a particular individual to replace him) means that when Joshua dies, there will be no single successor (i.e., a covenant mediator). In the future, Israel will be governed a group of leaders

¹ Hess, *Joshua*, 299-300; Howard, *Joshua*, 425-428.

² Howard, *Joshua*, 426.

³ Howard, *Joshua*, 430.

(hence the Book of Judges—indicating that such a transition had already taken place).⁴ Simply put, there are big changes afoot for Israel. These changes commence this day at Shechem.

As Joshua begins the covenant renewal ceremony, he recounts the history of God’s covenantal dealings with Israel, which go all the way back to the day in which God first called Abraham away from a foreign land, to this very spot (Shechem) where the people of Israel have now assembled. As we read in verses 2-4, *“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. 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. 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.’”*

As Joshua recounts the call of Abraham, it is vital that we notice that Abraham was not seeking God! On the contrary, he was in a pagan family in a pagan land, doing his own thing when God suddenly and graciously called him away from Ur to the land of promise. Joshua says God “took” Abraham and “led” him to his new home. As a consequence of this call, YHWH promised Abraham three things: 1). To give him so many descendants that he couldn’t count them, 2). To make his descendants into a great nation (Israel), and 3). To give them the land of Canaan (that land from the River of Egypt to the Euphrates). As Joshua speaks forth the word of God, you can only but wonder what those present that day thought about as they sat on the very spot where God made the promise of the land to Abraham. It must have given them all chills.

In verses 5-7, Joshua shifts his focus from Abraham to Egypt, where the people of God ended up in exile and captivity to Pharaoh. *“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. ‘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. 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.”* God not only sent leaders to his people (Moses and Aaron) and brought horrific plagues upon Egypt, but he rescued his people from the clutches of Pharaoh. He did this to fulfill his promise to Abraham. While the events associated with Terah, Abraham and Jacob seemed so long in the past, the events in Egypt were much more recent.

In fact, that generation of Israelites who entered Canaan were the children and grandchildren of the previous generation who had lived in Egypt and who participated in that first Passover and crossing of the Red Sea. This would be a similar situation to those of us who had parents who fought in WW II (or for some of you younger people, Vietnam). The people to whom Joshua was speaking may have never once set foot in Egypt, but you can bet they heard about life in Egypt and what YHWH did to rescue them from their parents and grandparents every day of their childhood. For a Jew living at the time of the Conquest, Israel’s bondage in Egypt and deliverance from Pharaoh set the tone for everything they’ve seen and done since. This is why Joshua reminds them *“you lived in the wilderness a long time.”*

That previous generation which was delivered from Egypt then spent forty years in the wilderness. Thirty-nine of those years were the result of what happened when scouts Moses sent into Canaan (except for Joshua and Caleb) came back and reported that while the land was everything the people hoped for, the Canaanites were too fierce and Israel could never drive them out. Because the people of Israel did

⁴ Hess, *Joshua*, 300.

not believe that God could keep his promise, he sent out into the wilderness where most of that generation died. And yet despite the people's grumbling and complaining, Joshua can now remind them in verses 8-10 that God was faithful and brought the current generation safely through the wilderness and into Moab on the very border of Canaan. They could all remember that time of great anticipation.

As we read in verse 8-10, "*Then I [Joshua] 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. 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, but I would not listen to Balaam. Indeed, he blessed you. So I delivered you out of his hand.*" In these verses, Joshua is summarizing the events of Numbers 21-24 when YHWH refused to put a curse upon Israel. Israel's defeat of the Amorites certainly helped them prepare to take on the Canaanites. These early battles helped Joshua organize the armies of Israel and prepare them to take on the Canaanites, as well as demonstrating to the people of Israel that if YHWH fights for them they cannot lose.

In verses 11-13, Joshua recounts the recent past—Israel's entrance into the land of Canaan. "*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. 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. 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.*" Joshua emphasizes God's miraculous actions on behalf of Israel. The people not only went over the Jordan (on dry ground), but Joshua mentions Jericho as symbolic of all of the battles with the Canaanites, because it was here that God's power was most clearly seen—as the walls of a well fortified city collapsed in the middle of a divine worship service as the armies of Israel processed around the city led by the priests and the ark. While many have speculated about what Joshua means when he speaks of the "hornet," more than likely he's using the word as a metaphor for the fact that God sent terror into the hearts of the Canaanites, not that he literally sent a single hornet who drove out Israel's enemies. The main point is simply that all of this was God's doing. YHWH fought for Israel, and he sent terror into the hearts of his enemies just as a swarm of hornets would do.⁵

In verses 14-24, Joshua now focuses upon the people of Israel who must renew their covenant with YHWH through affirming their willingness to do as he has commanded. Joshua will explain to them what this commitment requires and then ask the people to accept anew the blessings and curses of the covenant. Having concluded his historical prologue, Joshua now speaks to the people directly. His point is that since God has done all of this for you, Israel must respond by demonstrating their willingness to serve YHWH. As we read in verses 14-15, "*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. 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.*"

This is another day of decision for Israel. While their ancestors worshiped and served pagan gods (and many in Israel no doubt felt the pull to return to these same so-called "gods" due to the influence of their pagan neighbors), on this day, the people of Israel must renounce these false "gods" just as Joshua had

⁵ Howard, *Joshua*, 432-433.

done. This was not only required of them according to the first and second commandments, but obeying these commandments was the requirement to remain in Canaan and enjoying the blessings of God. Joshua and his house will worship and serve YHWH. And since Israel has come to yet another turning point in its history, it is vital that the people of Israel make it clear on this day whom they will serve.

In verses 16-18 they do. *“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, 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. 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.’”* If this is a day to choose then choose they will. They will worship and serve YHWH. He brought them out of Egypt. He freed them from their slavery. He did great signs in their midst. He drove out the Canaanites and gave them the land upon which they now live. They vow not to forsake YHWH, and they vow that they will not return to the pagan “gods” of their fathers.

But as Joshua points out, the people had better consider this vow carefully. *“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. 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.’”* In these two verses Joshua not only reiterates the blessing-curse principle upon which the entire Sinai covenant is based, but he gives Israel a powerful hint as to the true purpose of the law. According to the testimony of Paul, God gave the law to expose our sins and drive us to seek both forgiveness for our sins and a righteous which is grounded in perfect obedience to the law of God—namely the righteousness of Christ himself.

While one commentator calls this the most shocking statement in the Old Testament,⁶ these words make perfect sense *if* we keep the Mosaic covenant distinct from the Abrahamic covenant. The covenant God made with Israel at Mount Sinai is a national covenant based upon the blessing/curse principle. Joshua is warning Israel of the solemn nature of the oath the people have just taken. When they say that they will “serve the LORD” they are stating that should they disobey the covenant, the covenant curse will come upon them. Their sins as a people will not be forgiven and Israel will be cast from the land. And yet, the covenant God makes with Israel at Sinai does not annul the former covenant God made with Abraham. Under that covenant (the covenant of grace) God will forgive the sins of his people, if they believe his promise to save sinners. And so, if we keep these two covenants distinct (and we must), Joshua’s words are not shocking. In fact, they make perfect sense. The law condemns. That is what it was designed to do. While in this case, Joshua is not giving Israel a lesson in law and gospel, he is reminding the people of the gravity of renewing the Sinaitic covenant. If they say “we will serve the LORD,” then God will hold them to that confession. He will bless them if they obey, and he will curse them if they don’t. Those are the terms of the Sinaitic covenant, grounded in the blessing-curse principle.

But the people of Israel are not deterred at all by Joshua’s words. *“And the people said to Joshua, ‘No, but we will serve the LORD.’”* This is a clear profession of faith on the part of the people of Israel.⁷ Yet, we might say of Israel that the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak. Having heard the people of Israel once again affirm their covenant allegiance to YHWH, Joshua instructs the people about the serious

⁶ Butler, Joshua, 274.

⁷ Hess, Joshua, 307.

nature of the oath they have just taken. *“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.’ He said, ‘Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your heart to the LORD, the God of Israel.’ And the people said to Joshua, ‘The LORD our God we will serve, and his voice we will obey.’”*

Yet, there is already an ominous ring to these words. The people have been warned about the gravity of their oath and that they are collectively witnesses to the oath they have taken. But Joshua’s specific mention of the need to cast out “foreign gods” from their midst and that they must incline their hearts to the LORD, may be an indication that the slide away from YHWH into paganism is already underway and that certain of them had indeed been keeping images, amulets, statues and trinkets associated with pagan deities.⁸ Such were commonplace throughout Canaan, but were not to be found in Israel.

With that affirmation from the people, the covenant is ratified. According to verses 25-28. *“So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and put in place statutes and rules for them at Shechem. 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. 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.’ So Joshua sent the people away, every man to his inheritance.”* That Joshua added to the Book of the Law indicates that as covenant mediator, it is his duty to keep the historical record of how the covenant was administered up to date. In fact, because what Joshua records is covenantal, it also becomes canonical (Scripture) bringing the Book of Joshua to an end (making our current book canonical). This allows for the elders of Israel to add the final section (the dynastic disposition) explaining what happened to Joshua (a record of his death).

As for the stone of witness, it was commonplace at this time to set up a stone marker commemorating the ratification of the treaty as a kind of historical record on the spot where a covenant was renewed and listing the specific blessings/curses of that covenant. This was done as a lasting memorial to the people of Israel of what they had promised and what YHWH had threatened. Subsequent generations would see this stone and recall what happened here, or they would learn of it because Joshua had added his book (Joshua) to the five books of Moses. Crudely put, this meant that at this point in redemptive history, the Bible is five books plus one (the Pentateuch plus Joshua).

As for Joshua, his fate (along with that of Eleazar, the high priest) is spelled out in the balance of the chapter (vv. 29-33)—material added to the Book of Joshua after his death. In verses *“After these things Joshua the son of Nun, the servant of the LORD, died, being 110 years old. And they buried him in his own inheritance at Timnath-serah, which is in the hill country of Ephraim, north of the mountain of Gaash. Israel served the LORD all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua and had known all the work that the LORD did for Israel. As for the bones of Joseph, which the people of Israel brought up from Egypt, they buried them at Shechem, in the piece of land that Jacob bought from the sons of Hamor the father of Shechem for a hundred pieces of money. It became an inheritance of the descendants of Joseph. And Eleazar the son of Aaron died, and they buried him at Gibeah, the town of Phinehas his son, which had been given him in the hill country of Ephraim.”* With that, the end has come to a remarkable chapter in the history of Israel. A new one now begins in the Book of Judges. And it is all downhill from here.

⁸ Hess, *Joshua*, 307.

What then do we say by way of application?

Despite the hints that the people of Israel were already starting to head down the road to perdition through idolatry, the fact of the matter is that just like the first covenant renewal service at Shechem, this subsequent covenant renewal service before Joshua dies is remarkable testimony to the grace of God. Joshua recounts all that God had done for Israel—the history of the covenant—then calls the people of Israel to respond with one voice “We will serve the Lord.” This is an Old Testament equivalent of the profession of faith spelled out in Romans 10:9-10 (our New Testament lesson), by the Apostle Paul. *“If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.”* The people of Israel have heard Joshua recount God’s faithfulness. They respond with an affirmation to serve the LORD and reject idolatry.

This is what we as Christians do when we hear the good news (the gospel) about Jesus’ death upon the cross and his resurrection from the dead. We respond with both faith in Jesus Christ’s saving work and with the public confession that “Jesus is Lord” to the exclusion of all others!

Christian worship is largely based upon the fact that when we gather together on the Lord’s day, we too are participating in a covenant renewal ceremony, just as Israel did at Shechem. And yet the New Covenant promises are vastly superior to those of the Sinaitic covenant. The New Covenant is the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant of grace and Jesus is the greater Joshua. On each Lord’s day we affirm (confess) that the covenant curses have been removed by Christ’s death upon the cross. We affirm that we will serve the LORD, when we confess our sins, receive the promise of forgiveness, and then with one voice confess our faith publicly in the words of the Creed.

And just as Israel gathering together at Shechem was a witness to all the pagans around them that Israel was in covenant relationship with YHWH—the true and living God—so too when we gather together in this place on the Lord’s day, we are affirming that “Jesus is Lord,” that no one else is, and we do so as a witness to the pagans around us. And just as Israel affirmed “we will serve the LORD,” so too do we.

Beloved, we too must confess that “we will serve the Lord,” and we do so confessing that Jesus is Lord and believing in our hearts that God raised him from the dead.