

**Joshua 24:14-33 (1984 NIV)**  
***Choose Whom You Will Serve***

**Introduction**

48 men in Singapore once made history for the wrong reason. They were the first to be prosecuted for using an online sex service involving an under-age girl.

One of them, a former school principal, decided from the beginning to come clean. He confessed to his wife that he had cheated on her. He pleaded guilty to the charge, informed his superiors of his crime and offered to resign. When a nine-week jail sentence was passed on him, he said he would not appeal against it. In fact, he appeared before the media camera with his face unmasked and uncovered.

In a truly repentant manner, he said, "As a husband, the greatest damage has been to my wife. I thought to myself, how could I do such a thing to my wife? My top priority is now my family, not my career or reputation. I want to be a true husband, and a good father. It is my personal lack of control of my own moral standards and my weak resistance to distractors that led me to my mistake."

Though the man had renewed his marital vow with his wife, he still had to come to terms with his breach of devotion to her in the days ahead.

(*TNP*, 28 Apr 2012, pp. 2-3)

We live in an age that offers us many options, choices, and opportunities. And all these make it very difficult for one to be fully devoted to any one thing, any one person, or any one interest in an enduring manner. Yes, it is also difficult to be fully devoted in our relationship with God Himself.

But this is not a modern-day problem. Even in the ancient days of Joshua, the people were similarly distracted in their devotion to God.

In the last chapter of Joshua (Chapter 24), Joshua spoke to all the people. He called them to re-evaluate and renew their love relationship with God. Joshua was at the end of a long, full life. His greatest concern before he died was not himself, but the people of God and their relationship with Him.

We see in Joshua that a life that is fully devoted to the Lord is one that makes choices that honour Him. From Joshua's life, we learn that ...

**I. Our faithful devotion is God's desire but it must be our free decision (vv. 14-15).**

14 “Now fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your forefathers worshiped beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD.

15 But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, 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 challenged the people who had a spiritual unsettledness that marked their lives. He even implied that some of them had brought with them from Egypt, or acquired since they came into the land, some pagan gods. It represented a double-mindedness, a kind of restless indecision.

Joshua’s own life represented a wonderful contrast to the unwillingness of many Israelites to make the defining choice to follow God wholeheartedly. Thus, he had earned the right to be heard on this important issue of choice.

Now he stood up before the entire nation in the valley of Shechem between Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim. This was also where he first led them to renew their covenant with God after the defeat of Jericho and Ai (Chap. 8). Here in Chap. 24, he again reviewed the heart of God’s covenant love relationship with His people, calling them to a decision for the Lord.

The majority of the people stayed true to their faith, because in Chap. 23 they’re commended for their faithfulness and loyalty. But Joshua had observed that there were some who had embraced idolatry.

Joshua said to these people, “If you’re unsure, then think through the choices and decide what you’re going to do.” The children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren of Abraham and Sarah had flirted with pagan gods during their time. Joshua said the people could also return to the Egyptian gods, or they could choose the current Canaanite gods.

However, Joshua contrasted these gods of the Chaldeans, Egyptians, and Canaanites with the LORD God of Israel. He was a God who’s involved with them; who’s for them. Joshua listed the specific ways that God had interacted with His called-out people through the centuries.

Joshua was 110 years old when he gave this sermon, but he hadn’t forgotten his history. There at Shechem he recited this history for everyone to hear.

Verses 14 and 15 call us to renounce idolatry in our own lives. Idols are whatever that so mesmerize us that we give to them our fullest devotion instead of to God. We are called through the words of Joshua today to put that away and repent of it.

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When the Bible insists we give honour and glory only to the one true God, something more is being referred to than simply the statues before which pagans bow. The idols my heart adores include all those things which I demand for joy and significance.

John Calvin once said, “Our hearts are idol factories.” Idols are not made outside of us, but in our hearts. So, to remove the idols in our lives we need to deal with the spiritual state of our hearts.

How is your heart today towards Jesus Christ and all that He stands for? As Christians, God is calling us to look again at the person and work of Jesus Christ, and ask ourselves, “What are some life decisions I need to make or rethink so that I can follow Christ more fully?”

A life fully devoted to the Lord is one that makes choices that honour Him. From Joshua’s life, another thing we learn is that ...

## **II. God desires our devotion because He is a jealous God (vv. 16-28).**

Let’s look at the response of the people of Israel in verses 16-18.

16 Then the people answered, “Far be it from us to forsake the LORD to serve other gods!

17 It was the LORD our God himself who brought us and our fathers 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.

18 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.”

The people assured Joshua that they did want to respond to the Lord with faithfulness and loyalty to Him only. But Joshua’s response was surprising in verses 19-20:

19 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.

20 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.”

Why would he want to throw cold water on the wonderful enthusiasm of the people? Because Joshua understood that it’s easy for people to promise obedience to the Lord, but it’s something else to actually follow through. He’s saying, “Don’t make this decision lightly. Understand what’s involved.”

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When he said, “You can’t do these things,” the point is that God Himself is the only one who can do them. God transforms us from the inside out. We don’t just try harder to be good people and love God. We trust God to begin this work of change in us from the inside, and then it works itself out. That’s what Joshua wanted them to stop and think about. He warned them of God’s jealousy.

### The meaning of God’s jealousy

God is zealous—i.e. eager about protecting what is precious to Him. One thing He views as especially precious to Him is the nation of Israel. She belongs to Him as His special possession, His unique treasure.

No man with any moral fibre wants to share his wife with another man, and neither does God—He loves Israel as His own covenantal people. When Israel goes after other lovers, i.e. when she worships other gods and thus commits spiritual adultery, God is said to be jealous.

If I feel resentment or anger merely because I see my wife talking to another man, that would be self-centred possessiveness. Such sinful jealousy would stem from my own selfishness or insecurity rather than from my commitment to my wife or to what is right.

But if I see a man actually trying to seduce my wife, then I have reason to be righteously jealous. I am zealous for the exclusiveness and purity of our marriage, and that is righteous jealousy. The Lord feels the same way about His relationship with His chosen people—i.e. Israel. There is no selfishness in His jealousy. It is the appropriate expression of His holiness and love for Israel—i.e. He is being righteously protective of His own covenantal people because of His faithfulness towards Israel.

### The manifestations of God’s jealousy

- *He is jealous for His holy name (Ezek. 39:25).* God is sovereign and supreme over all. Were He to share His glory with other so-called gods, He would be elevating them to a position that would not be consistent with their true nature. Likewise, it would be making Him untrue to His own nature. He must be faithful to Himself and maintain His high and holy position, and He wants His people to attribute to Him that honour that rightly belongs to Him only.

The discovery that God is jealous for His holy name is not a call to become religiously fanatical. Rather, it is a call to develop a way of life that gives Him 1<sup>st</sup> place in our lives, and that reveals Him to a world lost in sin.

- *He is jealous for our best interests.* Not only is God jealous for Himself, but He is also jealous for us. He has a passionate, consuming zeal for our best interests.

God wants us to have the same attitude towards each other as fellow believers—i.e. to be jealous for one another's best interests. If we shared God's jealousy for other believers, we would be busily engaged in intercessory prayer; faithfully bringing their needs to God's attention. Our prayer lives would not be wholly occupied with our own needs and problems, but we would beseech God on behalf of the specific needs of others in the body of Christ.

Are you jealous for the spiritual welfare of other believers? If you have never done so, begin by making a list of others' needs and bring them before the Lord daily in prayer.

Now hear the response of God's people in v. 21: "No! We will serve the LORD."

Then in vv. 22-28, Joshua led the nation in an oath of loyalty to the Lord, a covenant ceremony renewing this love relationship.

This scene at Shechem reminds us to re-examine our own commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour.

Because God is jealous of our devotion to Him, one response is always appropriate—i.e. we must be willing to quit sitting on the fence. It is easy to live indecisively, always investigating the claims of Christ, always seeking to know the Bible but never taking that vital step of faith to act.

I know there must be serious study and strong understanding of Scripture. But it's sad when people never get beyond the point of investigating, studying and knowing. We cannot sit on the fence forever, choosing not to act/obey all the time.

Two men who lived in a small village got into a terrible dispute that they could not resolve. So they decided to talk to the town sage.

The first man went to the sage's home and told his version of what happened. When he finished, the sage said, "You're absolutely right."

The next night, the second man called on the sage and told his side of the story. The sage responded, "You're absolutely right."

Afterward, the sage's wife scolded her husband, "Those men told you two different stories and you told them they were absolutely right. That's impossible—they can't both be absolutely right."

The sage turned to his wife and said, "You're absolutely right."

We cannot sit on the fence all the time. There must come a time when we have to decide and do so decisively.

(<https://bible.org/illustration/absolutely-right>)

A life fully devoted to the Lord is one that makes choices that honour Him. From Joshua's life, one last thing we can learn is that ...

### **III. To choose to be devoted to God is to choose to finish well in life (vv. 29-33).**

Let's look at the closing verses of this book in vv. 29-33.

29 After these things, Joshua son of Nun, the servant of the LORD, died at the age of a hundred and ten.

30 And they buried him in the land of his inheritance, at Timnath Serah in the hill country of Ephraim, north of Mount Gaash.

31 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.

32 And Joseph's bones, which the Israelites had brought up from Egypt, were buried at Shechem in the tract of land that Jacob bought for a hundred pieces of silver from the sons of Hamor, the father of Shechem. This became the inheritance of Joseph's descendants.

33 And Eleazar son of Aaron died and was buried at Gibeah, which had been allotted to his son Phinehas in the hill country of Ephraim.

This section ends with three burials—that of Joshua, Joseph and Eleazar. All three had chosen to serve the Lord in their life time and finished well their earthly journey.

Joshua had faithfully served the Lord and His people when he died at age 110. He was buried with honour. There is no record of any great memorial built for him. But there were many memorial stones placed in the land at different times during his leadership, and they were all memorials to God and what He did.

Verse 31 tells us that the lifestyle Joshua demonstrated, the leadership he exercised, and the message his life told had a lasting impact on his generation and the generation that followed—"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."

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Joshua's epitaph was not written on a gravestone. It was engraved on the hearts and lives of people who had trusted him and submitted themselves to his leadership.

Joshua had both chosen well to serve God and finished well, leaving a spiritual legacy that would outlive his earthly time. He left something more valuable and lasting than a piece of land/property or sum of money (important these might be). Joshua left behind to others a testimony to the grace and power of God. Joshua could tell his story with God, not himself, as the main character.

The one title that marks Joshua out as having finished well is in 24:29—he was called “the servant of the LORD”. This is the only place in the book where he is given that title. The word “servant” is often looked down as derogatory. But I believe it is used here as a great title to describe Joshua.

Today, I want to say that to be great in the eyes of God requires a fundamental mental shift. This shift has to do with thinking this way—to be great in the eyes of God we must be willing to descend into greatness (not upward mobility, but downward mobility!).

The only way to understand what this means is to look at how Jesus descended into greatness in Phi 2:5-11 – “Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross. Therefore God exalted Him to the highest place and gave Him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

Before Jesus Christ came down to earth, He held the highest position in the highest heaven as the 2<sup>nd</sup> Person of the Holy Trinity. But ...

- Jesus who is worthy of all worship and the source of all power descended down from heaven as a helpless baby in a dirty stable.
- Jesus who is the giver of life came down from heaven and spent time with the lowly people of this world.
- Jesus who is the King of kings came down from heaven not to be served but to serve. He even got down on His knees and washed the feet of His disciples.
- Jesus who is sinless died on a cross as a condemned criminal.

- Jesus who “being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness”.

And God was so pleased with Jesus that “He exalted Him to the highest place and gave Him the name that is above every name”. That’s how Jesus descended into greatness.

I talked with some fellow co-workers in fulltime ministry. They told me how they had given up some high positions to be in ministry. I could sense that they felt somewhat short-changed and under-appreciated.

I gently reminded them that if we believed we had answered a higher calling, we must then believe we had not moved from somewhere higher up to somewhere lower down, but to somewhere more worthy or even greater in God’s sight. Otherwise, we would not be able to do ministry with peace in our heart, mind, and spirit.

An example of one who has descended into greatness would be the former President of the United States, Jimmy Carter. He now spends the majority of his time serving and helping the poor.

He could easily be spending his time going around the country making lots of money by making public speeches. Instead, he has chosen to spend his time building houses for the less fortunate.

Jimmy Carter and his wife (Rosallynn) became involved with Habitat for Humanity International in 1984 when the former president led a work group to New York City to help renovate a six-story building with 19 families in need of decent, affordable shelter.

Habitat is a Christian ministry based on the conviction that to follow the teachings of Jesus Christ, we must love and care for one another. Our love must not be words only—it must be true love which shows itself in action. Habitat provides an opportunity for people to put their faith and love into action. It brings diverse groups of people together to make affordable housing and better communities a reality for everyone.

Indeed, Jimmy Carter has descended into greatness by becoming a servant-carpenter in Christ’s name and love.

(<https://people.com/politics/jimmy-carter-rosalynn-carter-habitat-for-humanity-through-the-years>)

A life story that finishes well is not so much one that tells of what great things a person has done, but more of what great things God has done in and through that person.



We can begin to write such a story in our life time by asking some personal questions in our relationship with the Lord:

- What is happening in my life?
- What is God telling/teaching me in what is happening in my life?
- What am I going to do about it so that I can honour God in my life?

## Conclusion

As the curtains fall on this series of sermons from the Book of Joshua, we see in Joshua's life one thing very consistent—he lived his life fully devoted to the Lord, and he declared it in his last recorded sermon to the people with these words—"But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD" (24:15).

This devotion led him to finish well in his life. In 24:29, he was remembered not as the leader of Israel, but as "the servant of the LORD"; not for what he had done, but for what God had done in and through him.

A life fully devoted to the Lord is one that makes choices that honour Him.

*Let's choose to serve the Lord wholeheartedly from this day so that we can live a life fully devoted to Him.*

Amen!