



## “AS FOR ME AND MY HOUSE...”

SERIES: IMAGES OF WARFARE AND WORSHIP

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Joshua 24:1-33

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Everyone is destined to worship and serve a god. Recently I saw the movie *Everest* at the San Jose Tech. Museum. I learned that when climbers reach the top of Everest, they leave a memorial on the summit as a tribute to the “gods” of the world’s tallest mountain for making conditions favorable for the climb. There seems to be a feeling among climbers that without the gods working on their behalf, their climb would not be successful. There is no doubt that each of us will serve some kind of god. The only question is, which one will we serve?

Today we come to our final study in Joshua. As we have seen in earlier studies in this book, Israel has accomplished an amazing series of victories in battle, defeating 31 kings in the seven-year conquest of the land of Canaan. Now, before each tribe is dismissed to its inheritance, it’s time to express gratitude to God, to worship him and erect another memorial. Thus, Joshua gathers Israel together on one last occasion for the purpose of worship and covenant renewal. Even though this gathering is similar to the occasions we have already looked at in chapters 22 and 23, this coming together is a final, grand ceremony to climax the conquest of the land.

Joshua 24:1:

**Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and called for the elders of Israel and for their heads and their judges and their officers; and they presented themselves before God. (NASB)**

This is actually the fourth time in Israel’s history that the covenant between God and Israel is ratified and renewed. It had already been renewed at Mt. Sinai, following the exodus (Exodus 24); at Moab, after God had preserved Israel in the desert and defeated enemies east of the Jordan (Deut. 29:1); at Mt. Ebal, following the victories at Jericho and Ai (Josh. 8:30-34); and now on this occasion, following the conquest of the land. The first two of these covenant renewal ceremonies were mediated through Moses, and the last two through Joshua.

Shechem is the place where Joshua assembles the nation. There they present themselves before God, i.e., before the ark of the covenant. Shechem was a holy place. It was the site of the covenant ceremony of chapter 8. Abram built an altar there (Gen. 12:6-7). In fact, Shechem was the first place that was named in the Promised Land. That was where Jacob purchased land and built an altar (Gen. 33:18-20); and it was there, under

the oak of Moreh, where Jacob buried foreign idols (Gen. 35:1-4).

This chapter describes a formal covenant ceremony. The structure of the text follows closely what was known as an Ancient Near Eastern vassal treaty between a superpower and a weaker nation. These treaties had six parts: a preamble identifying the king; a historical prologue reciting the king’s kindnesses to the vassal nation; certain stipulations (the most important of which was an undertaking to serve only the king and his kingdom); curses and blessings; witnesses, and the deposit of the treaty document. All of these are represented in the text. God is the King of the land, and he is signing off on a vassal treaty, a covenant with his people Israel.

In our day we might not appreciate fully the scene that is laid out here. Perhaps we will be helped by remembering that we preserve the memory of certain historical events like the signing of the Declaration of Independence, marking such great occasions with monuments and holidays. This ceremony in chapter 24 marks just such an occasion for Israel and their God. Both the form and the place of the renewal indicate that this is an extremely important occasion. This event and the words spoken here are to be remembered forever in the history of God’s people.

Following the preamble in verse 1, a lengthy prologue sets out the kindnesses of Yahweh toward the people of Israel, beginning with Abraham’s call from beyond the Euphrates and concluding with the conquest of the land. Notice the references to Isaac, Jacob and Esau; the deliverance from Egypt; the wilderness experience; Balaam’s forced blessing, and the victories over the nations in the land. This is a time span of over six hundred years. In short, this is Israel’s history, Israel’s story.

Let us read what Joshua said. Verse 2:

**And Joshua said to all the people, “Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, ‘From ancient times your fathers lived beyond the River, namely, Terah, the father of Abraham and the father 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 multiplied his descendants and gave him Isaac. And to Isaac I gave Jacob and Esau, and to Esau I gave Mount Seir, to possess it; but Jacob and his sons went down to Egypt. Then I sent Moses and Aaron, and I plagued**

**Egypt by what I did in its midst; and afterward I brought you out. And I brought your fathers out of Egypt, and you came to the sea; and Egypt pursued your fathers with chariots and horsemen to the Red Sea. But when they cried out to the LORD, He put darkness between you and the Egyptians, and brought the sea upon them and covered them; and your own eyes saw what I did in Egypt. And you lived in the wilderness for a long time. Then I brought you into the land of the Amorites who lived beyond the Jordan, and they fought with you; and I gave them into your hand, and you took possession of their land when I destroyed them before you. Then Balak the son of Zippor, king of Moab, arose and fought against Israel, and he sent and summoned Balaam the son of Beor to curse you. But I was not willing to listen to Balaam. So he had to bless you, and I delivered you from his hand. And you crossed the Jordan and came to Jericho; and the citizens of Jericho fought against you, and the Amorite and the Perizzite and the Canaanite and the Hittite and the Girgashite, the Hivite and the Jebusite. Thus I gave them into your hand. Then I sent the hornet before you and it drove out the two kings of the Amorites from before you, but not by your sword or your bow. And I gave you a land on which you had not labored, and cities which you had not built, and you have lived in them; you are eating of vineyards and olive groves which you did not plant.’ (24:2-13)**

Notice that on twenty occasions in these verses the subject is God. God is quoted as saying, “I took. I brought. I made his seed many. I gave. I sent. I struck. I delivered.” On three occasions the word “He” refers to God. Six times God “gave”; five times God “brought into” or “out of.” The word “you” is used in only five phrases.

The point is obvious. Israel has been blessed because of the gracious acts of her King, not by means of her own strength, but because God fought for her: “not with your sword and not with your bow.” God doesn’t remind Israel of their supposed illustrious ancestry. On the contrary, he reminds them of their humble and utterly pagan beginnings and his own great acts of salvation. This is what Hannah sang about in 1 Samuel:

“He keeps the feet of His godly ones,  
But the wicked ones are silenced in darkness;  
For not by might shall a man prevail” (1 Sam 2:9).

Just like Israel, every believer has a story, an adventure that is fixed in time and marked by dramatic events. Our personal stories are an extremely important aspect of our spiritual life. And they are important to God, because he is their author and director. We should take care to preserve our stories as a means to cultivate covenant loyalty. But it is imperative that we see them in a larger context so that our personal histories do not become an end in themselves.

Let me explain. We can tell our story in many different ways. For example, we can make ourselves the victim or we can use our background to manipulate people, elicit sympathy or justify our selfish actions. But our story does us no good if it remains an island unto itself. It becomes powerful only when we connect it to the greater story of redemption, when we build bridges from our journey to Christ’s journey and change the subject from ourselves to God. Our story should be about what God has done and is presently doing with us; its goal should be to enhance covenant loyalty for ourselves and others.

We find the New Testament parallel to Israel’s story in Ephesians 2:1-6. Paul’s says: “And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest. But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places, in Christ Jesus.” After all our wandering, God has brought us into the land, giving us cities we did not build and vineyards we did not plant. He has defeated our enemies, giving us rest in Christ.

Do you know how your story connects to the Christ story? Is God the subject of your story? Perhaps it would be helpful to write down your salvation history. Make it a practice whenever you gather over a meal to give someone a stage to share their story. Our spiritual story is an important part of covenant loyalty.

Based upon God’s benevolent acts of kindness to Israel, what does he now ask Israel to do? Verses 14-18:

**“Now, therefore, fear the LORD and serve Him in sincerity and truth; and put away the gods which your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. And if it is disagreeable in your sight to serve the LORD, choose for yourselves today whom you will serve: whether the gods which your fathers served which were beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.**

**And the people answered and said, “Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods; for the LORD our God is He who brought us and our fathers up out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage, and who did these great signs in our sight and preserved us through all the way in which we went and among all the peoples through whose midst we passed. And the LORD drove out from before us all the peoples, even the Amorites who lived in the land. We also will serve**

**the LORD, for He is our God.” (24:14-18)**

God presents his people with three covenant obligations: They were to fear the Lord, they were serve him, and put away the gods they formerly served. The fact that they were to completely remove all foreign idols seems to indicate they still retained some of these practices which they had brought with them from Egypt, or even earlier. Now that God has brought Israel into the land, he demands that they completely remove their idols and serve him and him alone.

The key word in the text is the word “serve,” meaning, to work, worship, perform. Our work and our worship are closely connected. Whatever we give ourselves to most diligently is the thing that we worship and serve. Two qualifiers are given to the command to serve: “in sincerity,” i.e., in completeness, fullness, integrity, with wholehearted commitment; “in truth,” i.e., in faithfulness, with a sense of certainty and dependability.

In Genesis 2:15 we read, “Then the LORD God took the man and put him into the garden of Eden to cultivate it and keep it” (lit: “to serve and guard it”). These words are linked together in terms of providing care for the garden. In Joshua, the same two words are used to encourage Israel to covenant loyalty: “guard” is the key word of chapters 22 and 23; “serve” is the key word of chapter 24. Just as God had placed man in the garden, so God had brought Israel out of Egypt and placed her in the land of Canaan, “a land flowing with milk and honey”—a new Eden. And God tells Israel to guard the word and to love him and him only. What Israel is being instructed to do here is cultivate the garden of their soul—their relationship with God.

The garden of Eden story ended in disaster, of course. Both the man and the woman chose not to serve God. They wanted to become like him. Finding no idol in the garden they made themselves the idol. And they were cast out of the garden for their sin. Joshua had already warned the people that if they did not serve the LORD God, which they would fail to do, then they too would be cast out of the land: “the anger of the LORD will burn against you, and you shall perish quickly from off the good land which He has given you” (Josh. 23:16b).

God has acted in kind and gracious ways towards us, his people. He has given us the greatest gift of all—life in Christ. In return, he asks us for our exclusive loyalty and service. This is why we were created and redeemed. Our response to God’s love should be to serve and worship him wholeheartedly.

Serving God doesn’t mean we have to become involved in a whole range of Christian activities. It doesn’t mean that we quit our jobs and become missionaries, although it might mean just that. Serving God is a lot more organic and basic to our existence.

First, our service is to be exclusive. One cannot fear God and serve other gods at the same time. This is what Jesus said: “No one can serve two masters; for either he

will hate the one and love the other, or he will hold to one, and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon” (Matt. 6:24). Therefore we must completely remove everything that competes for our loyalty to God. Many idols demand our service: the god of money, the god of success, the god of perfection, the god of education, the god of family, the god of Christian activities. But to really serve the Lord we must remove these idols from our lives. God requires our exclusive loyalty and service.

Secondly, serving God must occupy every event, every affection and attitude. Throughout the day we must live for him and not ourselves. We must be conscious that everything we say and do can be an expression of serving God: the way we look at someone, the way we smile and say hello. We serve by praying, caring, and practicing hospitality. We can serve God at work, in the kitchen, at the grocery store, as well as at church. We are God’s redeemed possession, the vassals of a great King. Let us live in service of him.

But we’re not very good at that, are we? Adam and Eve failed miserably in the garden. So did Israel in Canaan. We are no different. We are proud and selfish and competitive. We have our own goals and agendas. We lack the readiness to make ourselves available to serve. We don’t come to church with an attitude of offering ourselves fully to God. We try to serve him while continuing to hold onto the things we want. We are too big and our God is too small.

Joshua asks Israel to declare their intentions, demanding that they make a choice. He knows they will serve some god. That is why he asks them if they will serve the gods of Terah, the gods of the Amorites, or the God of Israel. He gives each tribe and each family the freedom to decide for themselves. But, he declares, “as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.” In response, all of Israel declares they will do the same.

How do you think Joshua sounded when he made this statement? Did he thrust his right hand high in the air and shout these words at the top of his voice? I don’t think so. I picture a look of firm resolve on his face, not an emotional, superficial expression designed to manipulate the people. Joshua knows exactly what he is saying. He knows God and what God desires, and he knows his own weakness and vulnerability, so he speaks with sincerity, commitment and passion.

Joshua asks us to make a choice, too. Certainly, we will serve a god. The only question is, which one? This question disturbs us. It is intended to do so. Will we serve Yahweh, or the old gods of Terah, or the new gods of Canaan? God gives to us complete freedom to choose. If it is “evil in our eyes” to serve Yahweh, then by all means, God says we have the freedom to serve any god we like. It is up to us to choose.

Dr. John Smith was a missionary doctor in a remote part of Africa in the late 1800’s. He served there for ten years until his health failed. A fellow physician encour-

aged him to return to the States or he would surely die within six months. Two months later, Smith finally agreed to leave Africa. Some of the village people put him in a canoe and rowed him out to a ship anchored in the bay. As Smith boarded the ship he turned back for one last look and saw the villagers lined along the shore. He heard their cries for him to return.

Without hesitation, Smith put his bags back into the canoe and returned to the village. Three months later, the villagers gathered together again and cried. This time they gathered around his grave.

When we make a choice to serve the Lord it will probably be costly. It certainly was costly to Jesus. Remember what he said: "whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant; and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:43-45). Over the centuries, countless Christians have been willing to give up their dreams, their possessions, even their lives because they heard the call of the King to serve him and him alone.

On this great occasion, in his last address to the nation, Joshua and the people of Israel make a choice to serve the Lord. The text goes on to describe just how dramatically and formally they did so. Verse 19:

**Then Joshua said to the people, "You will not be able to serve the LORD, for He is a holy God. He is a jealous God; He will not forgive your transgression or your sins. If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, then He will turn and do you harm and consume you after He has done good to you." And the people said to Joshua, "No, but we will serve the LORD." And Joshua said to the people, "You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen for yourselves the LORD, to serve Him." And they said, "We are witnesses." "Now therefore, put away the foreign gods which are in your midst, and incline your hearts to the LORD, the God of Israel." And the people said to Joshua, "We will serve the LORD our God and we will obey His voice." So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and made for them a statute and an ordinance in 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 oak that was by the sanctuary of the LORD. And Joshua said to all the people, "Behold, this stone shall be for a witness against us, for it has heard all the words of the LORD which He spoke to us; thus it shall be for a witness against you, lest you deny your God." Then Joshua dismissed the people, each to his inheritance.**

**And it came about after these things that Joshua the son of Nun, the servant of the LORD, died, being one hundred and ten years old. And they buried him in the territory of his inheritance in Timnath-serah, which is in the hill country of Ephraim, on the north of Mount Gaash. And Israel served the LORD all the days of Joshua and all the days of the elders who survived Joshua, and had known all the deeds of the LORD which He had done for Israel. Now they buried the bones of Joseph, which the sons of Israel brought up from Egypt, at Shechem, in the piece of ground which Jacob had bought from the sons of Hamor the father of Shechem for one hundred pieces of money; and they became the inheritance of Joseph's sons. And Eleazar the son of Aaron died; and they buried him at Gibeah of Phinehas his son, which was given him in the hill country of Ephraim. (24:19-33)**

Which god will we serve? Who will we choose? We can't put this off until tomorrow, until after we have had our fling. Tomorrow may be too late. Remember Joshua's words, "Choose for yourselves *today* whom you will serve."

Let each of us ask ourselves:

What things or people do I serve and worship in my life more than God?

How has God been asking me to serve in ways I have been unwilling to do?

Am I willing to call myself a slave of Christ who will follow where he leads?

May we be like Israel in the days of Joshua: "Israel served the LORD all the days of Joshua and all the days of the elders who survived Joshua, and had known all the deeds of the LORD which He had done for Israel" (24:31).

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