

A Renewed Covenant

Devotional Reading: Jeremiah 31:27–34

Background Scripture: Deuteronomy 29:1–20; Joshua 23–24

Today's Scripture: Joshua 24:18–27

I. He Is Our God Joshua 24:18–24

18 And the LORD drave out from before us all the people, even the Amorites which dwelt in the land; therefore will we also serve the LORD; for he is our God.

19 And Joshua said unto the people, Ye cannot serve the LORD; for he is an holy God; he is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions nor your sins.

20 If ye forsake the LORD, and serve strange gods, then he will turn and do you hurt, and consume you, after that he hath done you good.

21 And the people said unto Joshua, Nay; but we will serve the LORD.

22 And Joshua said unto the people, Ye are witnesses against yourselves that ye have chosen you the LORD, to serve him. And they said, We are witnesses.

23 Now therefore put away, said he, the strange gods which are among you, and incline your heart unto the LORD God of Israel.

24 And the people said unto Joshua, The LORD our God will we serve, and his voice will we obey.

18. Seven groups of people are acknowledged to be foes to overcome in the conquest of the promised land (see

the complete listing in Deuteronomy 7:1; Joshua 3:10; 24:11). Of these, *the Amorites* seem to be the most troublesome. And the book of Joshua uses the word *Amorites* more than any other book of the Bible.

During the time of the conquest, Amorites lived both east and west of the Jordan River. Before Joshua led the Israelites across that river to attack Jericho, Moses had led the Israelites to defeat two prominent Amorite kings, namely Sihon and Og. However, even after that conquest was complete, there were five more Amorite kings to be defeated, west of the Jordan. Credit to *the Lord* for these victories predominates those accounts, as it does here. Sadly, Amorite spiritual pollution remains in parts of the land, posing a threat to Israel's allegiance to God.

The Israelites recognize the miraculous works of the Lord as a demonstration of His power. They follow Joshua's example and commit to loyal obedience to the most powerful *Lord* and *God*.

19a. With the wisdom of his many years, elderly *Joshua* senses that *the people* of Israel do not fully grasp the nature of their promise. His response may seem harsh or out of place, but his warning that they *cannot serve the Lord* stems from his experience with them. Although they commit themselves to obedience to the Lord, their history shows that such com-

mitment tends to be temporary (example: Joshua 32:1–6). Therefore, Joshua seems rightly concerned that while the Israelites have the capacity to serve the Lord in obedience, their willingness to do so may diminish.

19b. Joshua's warning to the people comes from his knowledge of God's distinct nature as contrasted with pagan gods. The Bible often stresses God's unique holiness in different ways. One way is in reference to His transcendent nature; He alone stands apart from creation in the very essence of His being.

Another way to understand God's holiness is to understand it in terms of His complete separation from sin. God's people in both the Old Testament and New Testament eras are to strive for such holiness themselves (Leviticus 11:44–45; 19:2; quoted in 1 Peter 1:15–16).

19c. We may usually think of the words *jealous* and *jealousy* in negative terms, as in being envious of someone else and coveting what they have. But in God's self-description, the words refer to being intolerant of rivals. The Israelites would enjoy the blessings of the Lord so long as they remained faithful to Him alone.

19d. This warning pertains to the conditions in the Lord's covenant with Israel. If the Israelites fail to comply with these conditions, the Lord will not simply forgive them without consequence. Instead, He will hold them accountable for their *transgressions* and *sins*.

20. The ultimate purpose for God's setting apart the promised land was to prepare the way for the Messiah. In receiving the land, the ancient Israelites were to realize the necessity to live lives of holiness. Such lives would reflect their covenant relationship with the Lord.

Should they *forsake the Lord*, abandoning their covenant responsibilities and turning to the *strange gods* of the sur-

rounding nations, they would sever the very relationship that was to define them. Pagan gods might seem appealing, offering the illusion of benefits such as fertile crops, abundant families, or national safety. However, such idolatry would defile the Israelites' covenant with the Lord as it would violate His explicit command to worship Him alone.

If the Israelites choose to worship these pagan gods, the Lord will *consume* them with punishment and take away the *good* blessings that He has given them. Such curses will include exile and dispersion among the nations.

21. In response to Joshua's challenge, *the people* of Israel reaffirm their commitment to *the Lord*. The scene is reminiscent of an important event that occurred at Mount Sinai several decades earlier. There, the Lord established His covenant with the Israelites. During that occurrence, Moses read the book of the covenant to them, and they responded, "All that the LORD hath said will we do, and be obedient" (Exodus 24:7).

22. Many things are said to serve as witnesses against the peoples, including "heaven and earth" (Deuteronomy 30:19), the "book of the law" (31:26), a "stone" (Joshua 24:27, below), and the Lord Himself (Jeremiah 42:5).

In this case, Joshua does not call upon an external witness. Instead, he appoints the people themselves as *witnesses against* their own testimony. If they turn away from the Lord and start worshiping other gods, they will be their own accusers.

23a. Joshua's command reveals that idolatry is still present among the Israelites, and its continued presence poses a serious threat to their spiritual health. This had been an issue in the past and continues to be an enduring problem, given how the Old Testament people were inclined to follow *strange gods*.

23b. The necessity of properly attuned hearts is also expressed in 1 Kings 8:58 and Psalm 119:36. This refers to a person's total submission to the authority and guidance of *the Lord God of Israel*.

24. This is the third time *the people* express the desire to *serve the Lord*.

II. We Give Our Witness

Joshua 24:25–27

25 So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and set them a statute and an ordinance in Shechem.

26 And Joshua wrote these words in the book of the law of God, and took a great stone, and set it up there under an oak, that was by the sanctuary of the LORD.

27 And Joshua said unto all the people, Behold, this stone shall be a witness unto us; for it hath heard all the words of the LORD which he spake unto us: it shall be therefore a witness unto you, lest ye deny your God.

25. At *Shechem*, the Israelites have committed three times to serve the Lord and have agreed to bear witness against themselves should they fail to uphold this commitment. *Joshua* holds them accountable to these promises. He does so by reaffirming the earlier *covenant* made at Mount Sinai during the leadership of Moses (Exodus 19–24). That initial covenant was first reaffirmed as the Israelites prepared to enter the promised land. Now that they have settled in the land, Joshua leads them in renewing that covenant, highlighting the continuity in their relationship with the Lord across the generations.

Joshua is not modifying or changing God's earlier covenant law. Instead, he calls the people to recommit to what has already been promised.

26a. Scripture rarely uses the description *the book of the law of God* (Nehemiah 8:8,

18; 9:3). In those instances, it may refer to the entirety of the Law of Moses. Another possibility is that it is an early form of the book of Deuteronomy. A third possibility is that it is a distinct document recording God's historical dealings with the Israelites. In either case, by writing *these words* in a book, future generations of Israelites will have a record of the promises their ancestors made to worship and obey God alone.

26b. Joshua sets up *a great stone* as a physical reminder of the people's promises to the Lord. This act follows the tradition of establishing physical memorials. These often mark significant encounters with the Lord (compare Genesis 28:18–22).

Since the time of Abraham, large *oak* trees have been present in Shechem. Ancient people often viewed groves of trees as sanctuaries where gods resided. However, in this instance, *the sanctuary of the Lord* likely refers to the tabernacle that had been erected near a specific tree. The stone will be a silent but enduring witness to the covenant promises the Israelites reaffirmed.

27. These are the last recorded words of *Joshua* before his death at age 110. His declaration foreshadows the sobering realities that the Israelites will face. They would experience prosperity and peace due to their obedience to the Lord. However, their commitment is short-lived. Even though they had sworn loyalty to *the Lord . . . God*, they will soon be seduced by the worship of pagan gods. They will break their covenant promises, fail to worship the Lord God, and *deny* Him as God.

As promising as the conclusion to the book of Joshua is, the conclusion to the book of Judges is disheartening: "In those days there was no king in Israel: every man did that which was right in his own eyes" (Judges 21:25). For the most part, the Israelites refuse to obey the Lord and accept the blessings.

Involvement Learning

A Renewed Covenant

Into the Lesson

What are some types of modern covenants or agreements?

What terms might be included in these covenants or agreements?

What are the possible consequences of breaking these terms?

The Old Testament includes many stories of covenants and agreements. Sometimes, people needed reminders of the promises they had already made. In today's study, we'll examine how Joshua reminded the people of one such covenant and renewed its stipulations.

Into the Word

Observe: Read Joshua 24:18–27. What words and details in those verses stand out?

Explore: Summarize the significance of each section of verses within the context of the whole passage.

Verses 18–21 _____

Verses 22–24 _____

Verses 25–27 _____

Ask: What question(s) do you have regarding the content in your assigned verses?

Reflect: What do the passage and the assigned verses teach you about the Lord and your walk with Him?

Key Text

[Joshua said] Put away the gods which your fathers served on the other side of the flood, and in Egypt; and serve ye the LORD.
—Joshua 24:14b

Into Life

List potential distractions that prevent you from remembering your commitment to God.

How can you overcome those distractions and renew your commitment to the Lord?

Thought to Remember

Choose this day who you will serve.