

July 19, 2026

VITAL DECISION: JOSHUA 24:14-24

Introductory Activity Option 1

Introduce: Tell the story of Johann Rall on page 79 of the ETB LG (We face decisions every day. Some are major, and some are minor. And some we try to ignore—often with devastating results. What’s more, our decisions can affect others in life-changing ways.

For example, Johann Rall, a German colonel during the American Revolution, made a historic decision in December of 1776. By some accounts, Rall was so wrapped up in a card game that he ignored the warnings of a British spy that the Americans were planning a surprise attack on his Hessian troops in Trenton, New Jersey. Yet, on Christmas night, George Washington led his troops across the Delaware River and did just what the spy had reported. In the battle, Rall was mortally wounded and died. Had Rall acted on the spy’s message, the American Revolution might have taken a very different turn.)

Skip to Discuss below.

Introductory Activity Option 2 (Adapted from ETB LG, 81)

Read, have someone read, or restate in your own words the opening paragraph on page 64 of the ETB PSG. (Crash landings of commercial jets are extremely rare. Nevertheless, one of the normal routines before a commercial jet takes off is flight attendants giving passengers instructions on what to do in case of an emergency landing on land or water. Most passengers seem to ignore the flight attendants. People might get away with that on a plane, but it is always costly when people ignore warnings in the Word of God.)

Discuss: “Why are people tempted to ignore warnings of potential danger?” (ETB PSG, 64)

Summarize and Transition: Sometimes people think the warning does not apply because the potential event will never happen. Others think that they are uniquely equipped to handle any situation. Regardless of the reason, warnings are provided because someone has faced the situation before, and the potential for danger is likely in the situation the warning is given. Today, in our passage, Joshua gives the people of Israel a warning. We have reached the end of the book, but the conquest of the land is not yet complete. Joshua is nearing the end of his life, and he calls the people together at Shechem. The first 13 verses of chapter 24 are a message from God given to the people by Joshua. The following 11 verses consist of a back-and-forth between Joshua and the people in response to God’s message. In these verses, “Joshua challenged the people to choose the Lord over the gods of the Canaanites.” (ETB LG, 79) While our situation is different, we can learn from this chapter that continued faithfulness is a daily decision, and it is vital that we make the correct decision.

1. CHALLENGE (JOSH. 24:14-18)

Read (or have someone read) Joshua 24:14-18.

Explain: This passage begins with the word “therefore.” Joshua is referencing the message from God in the preceding verses. In that

Notes:

This Lesson was created using:

- *Explore the Bible Leader Guide* (ETB LG)
- *Explore the Bible Personal Study Guide* (ETB PSG)
- *Explore the Bible Commentary* (ETBC)
- *Preaching the Word: Joshua* (Preaching)
- *New American Commentary: Matthew* (NAC)
- Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries: Joshua (TOTC)

message, the Lord had walked the people through the history of the nation. He began with Abraham's father and brought them through their recent history of conquering the land. If you analyze that message, you will see that there is a theme repeated. God says:

- "I **took** your father Abraham from the region beyond the Euphrates River." (v. 3)
- "I **gave** him [Abraham] Isaac." (v. 3)
- "I **sent** Moses and Aaron." (v. 5)
- "I **defeated** Egypt." (v. 5)
- "I **brought** you out." (v. 5)
- "I **brought** you to the land of the Amorites." (v. 8)
- "I **handed** them over to you."

God is not simply rehearsing their national history; He is reminding them that He has faithfully provided for them for hundreds of years. Even the location of the speech harkens back to God's work. Shechem "was the first place Abraham had camped when he entered Canaan and also where he erected the first altar on Canaanite soil (Gen. 12:6-7)." (ETBC, 71)

Ask: When you look back over your life, where can you see the hand of God at work? (ETB LG, 83)

Explain: We might look back on our lives and see the hand of God. He might have been present during a difficult medical episode or a significant personal transition time. His figure prints were all over the history of Israel, and if we have eyes to see, we can see something similar in our lives. There is one significant similarity between our lives and Israel's history. Probably the most significant work of God in the history of Israel is His deliverance of the nation from slavery in Egypt. Richard Hess reminds us, "The Christian has also been delivered from slavery to a kingdom of darkness and brought into God's kingdom of light, with the opportunity of a similar response of worship and service toward Christ." (TOTC, 336) If God did nothing more for us than save us from the effects of sin, we should still worship and serve Him. The work of God is why Joshua begins his speech with "therefore." And because of that "therefore," he issues a challenge to the people.

Reread verses 14 and the first part of 15 (See Notes Box.)

Explain: Joshua's challenge to the people comes in two parts. First, they are to "fear the Lord and worship him in sincerity and truth." If you look up fear in a thesaurus, you will find words like "terror," "fright," "distress," and "alarm." (**Teacher's note:** You can have a little class participation here. Instead of listing the synonyms for fear, you could have the group search for "synonyms for fear" on their phone and call out what they find.) But that is not what Joshua means when he commends the people to fear the Lord. Jackman writes, "Fear here is not a paralyzing horror but a reverent awe. It is the proper attitude of a redeemed sinner before a holy God, a humble

Notes:

"Now therefore' picks up the privileges of verses 2-13, in order to demand the equivalent obligations that follow." (Preaching, 188)

Joshua 24:14-15a

¹⁴ "Therefore, fear the LORD and worship him in sincerity and truth. Get rid of the gods your ancestors worshiped beyond the Euphrates River and in Egypt, and worship the LORD. ^{15a} But if it doesn't please you to worship the LORD, choose for yourselves today: Which will you worship—the gods your ancestors worshiped beyond the Euphrates River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living?

submission that recognizes that he is God and we are not and that therefore submits every area of our life.” (Preaching, 189)

The second aspect of Joshua’s challenge is to “Get rid of the gods your ancestors worshiped beyond the Euphrates River and in Egypt, and worship the Lord.” That statement should stop us dead in our tracks as we read the text. We should look up from our Bibles and say “Whhhaaaattt?” What do you mean, get rid of the gods, etc?! They still have idols and are still worshipping false gods?! It appears to be the case. The people were practicing what we call syncretism. Merriam-Webster explains that the word was first used in 1618 “to refer to the union of different religious beliefs.” It appears that the Israelites were worshipping Yahweh God *and* pagan deities. We do not know exactly what form this took. We do not know if it was an open secret among the people. But Joshua is telling them to just stop it. Stop going back and forth. Just decide. Make a decision. That is what he says in verse 15. He gives them three choices: worship the gods of their ancestors, worship the gods of the Canaanites, or worship Yahweh God.

Discuss: In the modern West, we might not face the choice of choosing between false deities represented by physical idols and the LORD God. However, we struggle with idol worship. In his *Larger Catechism*, Martin Luther writes, “What is it to have a god? Or, what is one’s god? Answer: To whatever we look for any good thing and for refuge in every need, that is what is meant by ‘god.’”¹ The syncretism of the Israelites means that they look to Yahweh “for any good thing” and “in every need” while also looking to the gods of their ancestors and the Canaanites. Consider their situation. For forty-plus years, the Lord had provided manna for the people every day. The Bible tells us that in the days after the people crossed the Jordan river into Canaan the manna had stopped and the people ate from the produce of the land (Josh. 5:12) Now as they settle and live in a land they “did not labor for, and cities [they] did not build... [they] are eating from vineyards and olive groves [they] did not plant.” (Josh 24:13) They will have to work to cultivate the land just as the Canaanites had. While cultivating the land, the Canaanites had prayed to their fertility gods to ensure a hardy harvest. To hedge their bets, the Israelites will be drawn into a worship of those hardy-harvest-producing-fertility gods alongside Yahweh, the maker of heaven and earth. We too can look to things other than God for our provision, success, and meaning. What might a Christian look to other than God for good things or in times of need?

Explain: Luther gives the answer that seems to confound every generation of believers: “Many a person imagines that he has God and everything he needs, provided he has money and property... The evidence for this

¹ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/new-city-catechism/what-is-idolatry/>; <https://bookofconcord.org/large-catechism/ten-commandments/>
J. Cardinell, 2026

appears when people are arrogant, secure, and proud because of such possessions, but desperate when they lack them or lose them.” Our wealth, even middle-class wealth, can become a source of our security or the thing to which we look in times of need. “I don’t have to worry about anything. I have money in the bank.” We can also look to our relationships for meaning and security. We might find our meaning in our spouse. God gives us partners in life, but it is in God that we find meaning and security. Hobbies, success, abilities, or our position in the community can all be gods that sneak into our lives. Tim Keller argues that idolatry is the most common form of sin mentioned in the Bible. He goes on to explain that we need to be on guard against any form of idolatry in our lives. He writes, “The reason why it’s so important to understand the sin of idolatry is that it can be growing in a part of your life for a long time and get very deep without it right away leading to clear, visible, and easily seen violations of God’s law.”² It is incumbent upon us to search our lives and our hearts for seeds of idolatry. When we locate them, we need to make a decision: are we going to worship the LORD God or whatever it is that might stand against Him in our lives? That is what Joshua did.

Reread Joshua 24:15b (See Notes Box)

Explain: This is a well-known verse from Scripture. In it, Joshua is not uttering a platitude. This verse is more than a nice phrase printed on a canvas bought at the home décor store. You see, this entire passage is a time of covenant renewal with the Lord. Joshua is declaring his allegiance to the Lord God in the face of a nation that is teetering back and forth in their allegiance. In response, the people affirm their commitment to follow the Lord. They refer to the work of God mentioned at the beginning of the passage and wholeheartedly commit to following the Lord.

Summarize Transition: This first passage in our lesson is about making a decision. It is interesting that Joshua did not demand they follow the Lord or die. He just told them to decide. Now, we know that if they decided to forswear their commitment to the Lord, they would remove themselves from His divine protection. However, Joshua tells them, “Look, just make up your minds. Commit to following the Lord or make a hard break with Him.” Joshua knew of what the apostle John spoke many years later to the church at Laodicea. He wrote the words of Jesus directed at the lukewarm church: “I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were cold or hot.” (Rev. 3:15) He also knew the spirit behind Jesus’ words to the rich young ruler: “You lack one thing: Go, sell all you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” (Mark 10:21) He also knew the context behind Paul’s word to the Romans: “Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may discern what is the good, pleasing, and perfect will of God.”

Joshua 24:15b
As for me and my family, we will
worship the Lord.”

² Ibid.

(Romans 12:2) The Israelites and disciples of Jesus today cannot waffle like the Laodiceans. We cannot cling to the securities of this world like the rich young ruler, and we cannot be conformed to this image of this world as the Romans were tempted. Instead, we must give ourselves wholeheartedly to the Lord, who will give us His best as we follow Him and become like Him. That is what Joshua does, and it is what the people commit to do. Let's see how Joshua responds.

2. WARNINGS (JOSH. 24:19-24)

Read (or have someone read) Joshua 24:19-24.

Explain: Verse 19 should give the modern disciple of Jesus pause. It should evoke a little cognitive dissonance. In other words, it should confuse us and cause us to learn more about what is going on. One commentator says, "Joshua's warning that God will not forgive Israel's sin has been described as 'perhaps the most shocking statement in the OT.'" (TOTC, 337) What is going on here?

In order to understand Joshua's statement, we must place it in the context of the passage and the entire OT. First, we should remember that this passage is a covenant renewal ceremony. The people are reaffirming their commitment to God's covenant with them. The statement is "not an absolute, eternal statement for the Lord's covenant people. [Instead, it meant] that God would not overlook their unfaithfulness and there would be consequences for their sin." (ETB PSG, 69-70) Second, we should remember that God had promised them that there would be consequences if they defaulted on their covenant commitment, including worshipping Him alone (See the first of the Ten Commandments). Those consequences included "drought, famine, disease, defeat, and ultimately exile from the promised land (Deut. 28:15-68)." (ETB PSG, 70)

In other words, it was God's commitment to them that prevented drought, famine, disease, defeat, and insecurity in the land. If they pulled out of the covenant, they would be removing themselves from the blessings of God. However, God would never pull out of His covenant agreement with them. He would use those negative experiences to woo the people back to Him. This is the story of the rest of the Old Testament. It was as if Joshua knew the events outlined in the book of Judges and the following books. He knew that the people would fail to pursue the Lord. He knew they would not keep their commitment to Him. The book of Judges is just the beginning. The nation has its ups and downs, but eventually the people become so evil that God removes them from the Land. Just as the Canaanites became too evil for the land, so too will the Israelites. God will remove them just as He removed the Canaanites. However, and this is the great mercy of God, He will use that time, recorded in books like Daniel, to draw the people back to Him. After the exile, they will return their hearts to Him, and He will return them to the land. But all of that is a long way off. In Joshua 24, the people stand at Shechem and commit to follow the Lord.

Notes:

In verses 21-24, the people again reaffirm their commitment to the Lord, and Joshua again tells them to get rid of their idols.

What does this mean for us? Let's consider this from three angles: Our salvation, our idols, and our discipleship.

Our Salvation: Like the Israelites, our salvation was initiated by the Lord. He did the work. On the other hand, our salvation is different from the Israelites' covenant. Our covenant relates to eternity. We can drift from our commitment to the Lord, and we will face the consequences on earth, but God will not renege on His commitment to bring us into eternity. Our salvation is secure

Our Idols: We can't spend much time here, but the Israelites had several options of idols to worship: the ones their ancestors worshipped back in Abraham's time (those beyond the river), the ones their parents and grandparents worshipped in Egypt, or the ones the Canaanites worshipped. This can remind us that sometimes the idols in our lives are **passed down to us**. The habits and mindsets of past generations can infect us. We must examine our hearts and minds and make sure that we have not "inherited" unbiblical ways of being from past generations. We also learn that sometimes idols and unbiblical ways of being are **passed along to us**. Like the Israelites who began to practice the religion of the Canaanites, we can learn unbiblical and evil ways of being from those around us. The world is happy to pass along the evil it knows. Let us not be conformed but be transformed.

Our Discipleship: In light of all of this, we should be vigilant in our pursuit of Christlikeness. In his book *Practicing the Way*, John Mark Comer argues that we are all being formed into something by something. We are either being formed into the image of this world by the forces of this world. Or we are being formed into the image of Christ by Christ. The world is working hard to push itself onto us and into us. In response to the pressures of this world, Comer quotes Flannery O'Connor: "Push as hard as the age that pushes against you." In other words, we must be diligent and committed to the pursuit of discipleship. We must push hard against the impulses of this world and open ourselves up to the change Christ wants to do in us.

Summarize and Transition: Joshua gave the people a challenge to choose the Lord. The Israelites committed to do just that. As we will see, this was harder for them than they might have imagined. That is where we will pick up next week. But let's conclude with a challenge.

CONCLUDE

This week, take a moment and imagine yourself at Shechem. You might have hidden idols in your world. Or you might, as Keller taught us, have budding idols that you are not quite aware of. Take some time with the Lord and ask Him to examine your heart and bring to light any idols you might have. Commit to do away with them and ask the Lord to help you lean into His transforming Spirit as you pursue Christlikeness.