

Incline Your Heart to the Lord

Joshua 24:1-28

This chapter is the final chapter in the book of Joshua. Today's sermon is also the final sermon in our series in this book. Next week we will begin a new series in the book of Acts.

But before we begin a new series, we need to pause and pay attention to this final chapter in this book.

This chapter contains Joshua's final words to Israel. There is much here for us to ponder. If you knew the time of your death, what would your final words be? Many people who were trapped in the Twin Towers were able to make phone calls to family & friends before they died. They spoke of what was most important to them.

This final chapter in the book of Joshua contains what is most important for Israel to remember. What do we find in this chapter? We find a review of God's redemptive action in Israel's history which lets Israel know that the only reason they are alive is because God has been among them. Second, we find a reminder of the fearful holiness of God and our spiritual inability to worship Him. Third, we find a personal challenge from Joshua that calls for a decision to be made. Last, we find a renewal of the covenant or a rededication to the Lord.

Review of Redemptive History (2-13)

It is interesting to me that Joshua's final words begin with a review of the redemptive history of Israel. Joshua calls all the tribes of Israel together at Shechem and they present themselves before God (vs1). We are here this morning in the presence of God. The presence of God was what made Israel distinct from every other nation (Ex 33:14-16). It will be the presence of God among us that will make Hope distinct. Oh let it be said of those who attend Hope Christian Church, "I sensed the presence of God among those people."

Joshua brings them together for a worship service and he recounts the history of Israel beginning with Abraham and ending with their deliverance into the Promised Land. He does not merely recount the historical facts. He presents Israel's history in terms of God's activity. Primarily it's not Israel's history. It is *God's* historical activity *in* Israel.

This is amazing to me because we get bored with history. We think we can read the Bible two or three times and we've got it. We come to passages like this and we think, "I know this stuff. I know the history of Israel. I know about Abraham. I heard about Isaac. I know about Jacob & Esau. I know about Egypt and the slavery and the plagues and the Red Sea. I know about the battles on the east side of the Jordan and I know about the Jordan and Jericho."

I beg you not to come to God's word with that kind of attitude. Evidently Joshua, at the end of his days and led by the Spirit of God, thought recounting the history of God's work in Israel was significant enough that he chose to make it the beginning of his final words.

Most of What I Say Is Review

I hope you won't begrudge me for often reminding you of what you already know. Ninety-eight percent of preaching is simply repeating what God has already said, but in a fresh & living way. As a pastor, my life verse is 2 Peter 1:12, which says,

Therefore, I intend always to remind you of these qualities, though you know them and are established in the truth that you have. 13 I think it right, as long as I am in this body, to stir you up by way of reminder..."

It is not my job to stand up here each week and impress you with something new & creative. It's my job to "stir you up" by reminding you of the wonders of what God has done in the past and helping you reach out in faith to grab hold of that same God and pray that He will again do wonders among us for the sake of His great name and for the sake of those who have never heard of His great name.

More Than A Casual Review of Facts

Reviewing biblical history is more than a casual review of facts. And if we remember Stephen (Acts 7) we will see that preaching a review of the history of Israel could get you killed. Stephen was the first Christian martyr. Stephen preached a sermon that simply recounted Israel's history, but when his hearers realized that their history was simply a litany of stubborn rebellion against a gracious God they picked up rocks and stoned him to death. Reviewing the history of Israel should make us tremble, because in it we see the greatness of our God and the weakness of our own hearts.

So let's look at verses two and three, which describe the beginnings of God's gracious work. As Joshua recounts Israel's history, he does so from God's perspective. The fact that Israel is a nation and even has a history is because God has been among them and intimately involved in their lives every step of the way. In fact, He is the reason they are alive.

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. 3 Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan. (Joshua 24:2)

An Idolatrous Father of Faith

We remember Abraham as the father of faith and yet we discover that in the beginning of his story he was an idol worshipper. Abraham and his fathers "served other gods" (24:2). Abraham was simply living life the only way he knew how until God entered his life and **took** hold of his heart. If God had not taken hold of Abraham, he would have continued serving other gods and there would be no Israel. Yet God took him out of a life of idolatry and began to lead him through the land of Canaan (24:3).

This is how God works with His people. He reaches into our lives, takes a hold of our hearts, and then begins to lead us. We do not save ourselves. If God had not first taken hold of my heart, I too would have gone right on living a Godless life and never knowing what I needed most.

God continues recounting His gracious acts. He says, *“I gave Isaac to Abraham (24:3) and to Isaac I gave Jacob & Esau”* (24:4). Then God gave Esau Mt. Seir but Jacob and his children went to Egypt¹ (even though Jacob’s line was the chosen line and Esau was not).

Then it was God who rescued Israel from Egypt by sending Moses and Aaron (24:5). God says *“I sent the plagues to Egypt and then I delivered Israel out of Egypt”* (24:5-6).

After bringing Israel out of Egypt He led them right up to the shore of the Red Sea (Ex 14:2; Josh 24:6). God intentionally led them to a place of utter helplessness and complete dependence upon Him.

- This is us; completely unable to save ourselves.

God then used the **Red Sea** to both destroy Egypt and deliver Israel. And Israel was a witness to both the deliverance and the destruction (24:7).

- (God used the death of His only Son as He spilled his **Red Blood** as the means of both the destruction of death and our deliverance into eternal life.)

Then it was God who sustained them for 40 years in the desert and it was God who *“brought them to the land of the Amorites and gave them into the hand”* of Israel (24:8). In verse 8 God says, *“I destroyed them.”*

24:10 *“I did not listen to Balaam.”*

24:11 and *“I gave into your hand”* Jericho all the Amorites.

24:12 *“I sent the hornet before you to drive them out. It was not by your sword or by your bow.”*

24:13 *“I gave you the land. I gave you cities that you didn’t have to build and I gave you fruit that you didn’t have to plant.”*

In other words, Joshua is saying, “Israel, the only reason you are alive today is because God has caused you to live. The only reason you are today a nation is because God has decided to lavish His grace upon you. The only reason you have overcome your enemies is because God has fought for you. The only reason you have a full belly is because God has graciously shown His favor upon you even though you are an unworthy nation. The only reason you have this land today is because of the grace of God Almighty.”

Fear Him?

Therefore, fear Him. The God you serve is gracious and He is awesome. He is holy and He is jealous. He will not allow you to worship wood and stone. He will not take second place to a god who can’t talk, has no power, and has to be carried around.

- Your God is the God who can take an idol worshipping nobody and turn him into the father of faith.

¹ Joseph’s own view was that God Himself sent him to Egypt (see Gen 45:7-8).

- Your God is the God who can cause a 90 year-old women and a 100 year-old man to have a baby. He is the God who can bring life out of death.
- Your God is the God who raises one man up and doesn't raise up the other (i.e. Jacob & Esau).
- Your God is the God who controls the mightiest nations in the earth.
- Your God is the God who controls the seas.
- Your God is the God who controls entire armies and He can wipe them away in a moment if He chooses.
- Your God is the God who controls light & darkness.
- Your God is the God who can keep you alive for 40 years in a place where there is no food and no water.
- Your God is the God who can remove entire nations if He chooses.
- Your God is the God who can turn a curse into a blessing.
- Your God is the God who can destroy even the most fortified city.
- Your God is the God who commands insects and they obey.
- The kings of the earth bow before Him.

This is the God whom we should fear and serve (i.e. worship) with sincerity and faithfulness.

Choose Whom You Will Serve (14-18)

After making sure they remember all that God has done, he then asks them a simple question. "So whom will you serve?" You need to choose *today* whom you will serve? Will you serve the gods of Egypt (who could not deliver Egypt out of Yahweh's hands)? Will you serve the gods of the nations whom you have destroyed across the river (the gods who couldn't deliver out of Yahweh's hand)? Or will you serve Yahweh?

Notice it is not a question of *if* they will worship. The question is simply *whom* they will worship. Humans were created to worship. We all worship something. The question is *what* or *whom* do we worship? Will we worship and serve false gods or will we worship the One True God.

Joshua makes a very bold public statement. Remember, he's standing before all the tribes of Israel and before God (24:1). He says, "*As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord*" (24:15). Joshua has made up his mind whom he will serve. He will serve the Lord.

Fathers, there are lessons here for us. Fathers you need to lead your family in worship. What you worship your family will probably worship also. If you value sports and leisure, then most likely so will your family. If education is most important to you, dad, then most likely that's what your children will pursue. If career is what you value most in your home, then your

children will pick this up and they too will value highly getting a good job. Father's what do you worship?

Joshua says, *"If it is evil in your eyes to serve the Lord, then today make up your mind whom you will serve"* (24:15). Now, like good church-folk, these Israelites answer (vs.16);

24:16 *"Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods... 18 we also will serve the Lord, for he is our God."*

You Are Not Able (19-24)

Israel seemingly gives a great response. Essentially they say, "Yes, Joshua, we are with you, we want to serve the Lord. He is our God." Joshua does not give the expected answer. Instead of saying, "Yes, that's the answer I was hoping for!" He turns to them and he says,

24:19 *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. 20 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.*

Joshua is saying, "You can't do this on your own. God is so holy and you are so sinful, you cannot serve Him the way He deserves to be served. You don't have the heart!"

I'm making the connection here to the heart, because on a similar occasion Moses did. At the end of Moses' life, he gathered all Israel, just as Joshua has done on this occasion, to himself and gave them a final sermon. Here's what he said.

Deut 29:2 *And Moses summoned all Israel and said to them: You have seen all that the LORD did before your eyes in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh and to all his servants and to all his land, 3 the great trials that your eyes saw, the signs, and those great wonders. 4 But to this day the LORD has not given you a heart to understand or eyes to see or ears to hear.*

Both Moses and Joshua came to the same conclusion; on our own we are unable to worship the Lord. Despite everything Israel had seen, the wonders God performed in Egypt, the daily miracles in the desert, despite all they had witnessed with their own eyes, *they were still spiritually unable* to love God with all their heart.

Why couldn't they? Lets go to Joshua's response to the people in 24:21.

24:21 *And the people said to Joshua, No, but we will serve the LORD. 22 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. 23 He said, Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your heart to the LORD, the God of Israel.*

Put Away The Foreign Gods

Joshua knew the main problem was their heart. Moses said the same thing. The problem was the heart. Their hearts were leaning in the wrong direction. In their hearts they loved idols. Joshua tells

them twice to “put away the false gods.” First in verse 14 and second in verse 23.

Look again at verse 23. Joshua says, *“Put away the foreign gods that are among you.”*

They were still carrying around the gods of Egypt. They still had them with them. The gods their “father’s served beyond the River and in Egypt” were still among them. Remember, their fathers were the ones who had been condemned to death in the desert because of their disbelief and yet the Israelites still had these gods among them. They were still holding on to them.

Stephen mentioned this fact in the historical review sermon that got him killed.

Acts 7:42 *But God turned away and gave them over to worship the host of heaven, as it is written in the book of the prophets:*

*“Did you bring to me slain beasts and sacrifices,
during the forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel?
43 You took up the tent of Moloch
and the star of your god Rephan,
the images that you made to worship;
and I will send you into exile beyond Babylon.*

They were stubbornly holding on to the gods of their dead fathers. They couldn’t serve the Lord because in their hearts they were still serving others gods. Their hearts were still leaning toward the idols they had created. Their hearts were not leaning into the Lord.

This was true of the Jews even in Stephen’s day. And when Stephen revealed to them their resistance to the Holy Spirit, they killed him.

Acts 7:51 *“You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you.”*

The command is to *“put away the foreign gods among you and incline your heart to the Lord, the God of Israel.”*

If people resisted total surrender to the Lord in Moses’ day, and in Joshua’s day, and in Stephen’s day, then does there remain any resistance to the Holy Spirit in our day? Is there any resistance to the Holy Spirit today, here in this room?

Last night four of us (five including Jesus) gathered in this room to pray that the Lord would remove all resistance to the Holy Spirit.

Joshua commanded false idols to be “put away.” Is there anything we need to “put away?” Is there any idols you are clinging to that you need to put away?

Col 3:5 *Put to death therefore what is earthly in you:*

sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.

6 On account of these the wrath of God is coming.

7 In these you too once walked, when you were living in them.

8 But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your

mouth. 9 Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices 10 and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.

If we want to serve the Lord, the God of Israel, and Father of Jesus, then we must “put away” all of these idols. We must let go of these idols and incline our hearts toward the Lord. We cannot lean into the Lord if our spiritual pockets are full of sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed.

There is no room in our hearts to love our Savior if our hearts are filled with anger, wrath, and malice. And we cannot rightly praise our Savior if our mouths are filled with slander and obscene talk.

The scary thing is that on our own we can't change our hearts.

Earlier I mentioned that our next sermon series will be in the book of Acts. One of the reasons for moving into the book of Acts is because it tells the story of the coming of the Holy Spirit. Only the Holy Spirit can change your heart. Only the Holy Spirit can cause us to stop loving false gods and start loving the One True God.

Only the Holy Spirit can allow us to see as delightful the duty to incline our hearts to the Lord.

Why the book of Acts? Because maybe if we review the book of Acts the Lord will choose to pour out His Spirit on us like He did in those days. Perhaps in reviewing, we will be renewed.

The Renewal of the Covenant

The end of this chapter is a renewal of the covenant (24:25-27). It was at Shechem that God first promised Abraham that he would give the land of Canaan to his descendants. After receiving that promise he built an altar (Gen 12:6-7). Joshua & Israel were standing on that very land that had been promised to Abraham when they renewed the covenant.

It was also at Shechem that Jacob called on his family to “*Put away the foreign gods that are among you and purify yourselves*” (Gen 35:2,4). They gave him the idols and Jacob buried them under the terebinth tree (Gen 35:4). It was under the terebinth tree that Joshua set up a stone of witness.

Today, right now, will you go down on your knees and put away the idols you're clinging to. Get on your knees and confess your sins and bury them under the terebinth tree. After you have confessed your sins, then stand and sing your praises to the Lord who forgives your sins; stand and sing a song of witness like the stone that Joshua set up under the terebinth tree.

Holy Spirit, Spirit of Jesus, come to us now and change our hearts. Incline our hearts away from the things of this world. Come now and put to death the earthly things that remain in us. Let this morning be the morning that sin no longer is alluring. Give us the heart to choose today to love You as You deserve. Help us Lord God to put away the idols that yet remain in our tents. Open our eyes so we can even see what idols are even in the tent. Cleanse us. Purify us. Renew us. Revive us. Let us lean into You like a frightened child leans into her father. Wrap your arms around this church and protect us from the evil one.