

“Who Will You Serve?”
Joshua 24
June 8, 2003
Dr. Jerry Nelson

What (or who) do you “worship”?

I’m not asking what or who do you sing songs about but what or who do you actually worship?

To understand my question better, think of it outside of the context of the church and worship services.

Everyone worships.

It is only a matter of who or what.

The word worship, other than in the context of church or a love song, is not a word we often use.

Maybe if I remind you what worship means you would more easily understand my comment that “**everyone** worships”.

In English dictionaries, worship speaks of **a reverential awe** of something or someone and a consequent **complete devotion** to that something or someone.

It is to be so captured by something or someone that you give yourself to it or them – you order your life around it.

In the Hebrew language (and in the biblical text we contemplate today), worship speaks of **fear** and **service** – those are the same two concepts we’ve already seen in English.

The “fear” in worship is about a reverential awe or even stronger, an unsettling terror at being in the presence of something so different, so big, so encompassing that you can’t comprehend it.

It’s so much bigger than you are, and has the ability to exercise so much control over your life that you are in awe, terror, or fear.

But worship is not only about fear it is also about serving.
True worship of anything or anyone **results in our**
servicing what we worship.

When we fear something or someone, our self-preservation says try to control it or yield to its demands.

When something truly threatening confronts us our first tendency is to flee but if unable to escape our second tendency is to determine how to do whatever is necessary to mitigate the threat.

In other words we serve what we think will best serve us.

That's the relationship most people have with their gods.

The tribal peoples of the world called Animists who fear the gods of rocks and trees, who they believe have control over their welfare, work hard at appeasing those gods, serving those gods so that the gods will favor them with protection, health, pleasure and long life.

The modern secularists, fearing the unknown and fate, diligently serve the gods of money and power desperately hoping they will at least delay the unknown and give at least temporary protection, health, pleasure and long life.

Whether it is the Animist or the Secularist or the countless other variations, people give themselves to, they serve the gods, they think will best protect and provide for them.

Some others may in fact give lip service to religion but they worship, that is they fear and serve, the gods of money, or power, or prestige.

How else can you explain a man or woman selling themselves to their job no matter the cost to their family, friends or anything else?

They **fear** life without the financial security or significance that money can buy and thus they serve the gods of money or position.

We can tell who or what we worship by looking at what we most fear and serve and what we **most** trust will protect and provide.

Or maybe our thinking is not as sophisticated as that.

Joy Davidson in her book, Smoke on the Mountain, wrote,
 “What shape is an idol? I worship Ganesa, god of worldly wisdom, patron of shopkeepers. He is in the shape of a little fat man with an elephant’s head; he is made of soapstone and has two small rubies for eyes. What shape do you worship?”

“I worship an Audi convertible. All of my days I give it offerings of washings and polish. Hours of my time are devoted to its ritual; and it brings me good luck as it establishes me among my fellows as a success in life. What model is your car, brother?”

“I worship my house beautiful. Long and loving meditations are spent on it; the chairs contrast with the rug, the curtains harmonize with the woodwork, all of it is perfect and holy... I live for my home and it rewards me with the envy of my sisters... Lest my children profane the holiness of my house with dirt and noise, I drive them out of doors. What shape is your idol sister?”

“I worship my job... I worship my golf game... I worship my comfort; after all, isn’t enjoyment the goal of life?... What shape is your idol?”

(Joy Davidson, Smoke on the Mountain 30-31)

The revered leader, and now old man, Joshua called the entire nation of Israel to meet him at a place called Shechem.

He wished to give them his final words.

I know that last week I called chapter 23 “Joshua’s farewell address to the people”.

It is possible that this final chapter of the book is another account of the same event – simply calling to mind different emphases.

Or it is more likely that Joshua called them to Shechem to give them the conclusion of his farewell address.

Maybe like a preacher who says, “in conclusion” three times and you aren’t certain the sermon will ever end.

Not so in Joshua's case, he brings the whole matter to a very definite conclusion, the point of his message, in verses 14-15 of chapter 24.

Joshua 24:14-15 "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. 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."

Remember I began with asking who or what you truly worship?

That's the question Joshua is asking.

And Joshua makes it clear later, as I tried to earlier, that worship is not just sitting in worship services and singing songs, but as he says here, it is about who you fear and serve.

And Joshua offers them at least three options.

- You can worship the gods your forefathers worshipped beyond the River and in Egypt. v14
- Or you can worship the gods of the Amorites. v15
- Or you can worship the LORD God. v14,15

As is evident from the context, at which we will look in a minute, Joshua is not suggesting these are equally valid options BUT he is acknowledging that the options exist.

In spite of 40-plus years of history of God miraculously working on their behalf, bringing them out of Egypt, defeating their enemies and giving them this new land as their own, there were evidently some among them who were tempted to serve the gods of their forefathers beyond the River.

Over 500 years earlier God had called an idol-worshipping man by the name of Abraham out of Ur of the Chaldees (modern day southern Iraq) on the east side of the River – the Euphrates River.

Abraham was part of a family and people that worshipped idols – gods they feared and served hoping they would protect and provide for them.

Even when called by God to move to Haran, hundreds of miles away, some of the family carried their idols with them – apparently still trusting more in those gods than the Lord God.

Even when God called Abraham to go to Canaan, and after Abraham and Sarah had Isaac, and Isaac married and had his son Jacob, and Jacob married and had his 12 sons – some of them were still carrying those idols – still trusting them rather than the living God.

In fact it was at this very place, Shechem, where Joshua now gives his final appeal, that Jacob told his family to get rid of those gods. (Genesis 35:2)

But here in Joshua 24:14 it seems that some of them continued to keep their ancient gods even when they were in Egypt – still trusting more in those gods than in the God of their fathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

I know a man who though reared in a different religion, for several years heard the gospel faithfully preached and who said he trusted in Jesus alone and would serve God.

Not long after and for years he never darkened the door of a church and lived serving himself rather than God.

Recently he has learned that he is dying and all of the sudden he has returned to all of the accoutrements of his childhood religion and is placing his hope in his daily recitations of certain prayers.

He trusts more in his ancient gods from beyond the River than in the Living God.

While some of the people standing before Joshua were trusting in those gods, others were serving the gods of the Amorites.

The Amorites were the people who still lived in Canaan alongside the Israelites.

These were Israel's contemporaries.

Their gods were contemporary gods – the culturally accepted gods.

And though some of the people of Israel gathered at the Tabernacle for worship, during the rest of the week they showed by their conduct that they actually feared and served the other gods.

The options were real – there are many gods to choose from.

But Joshua is appealing to his people to choose the LORD.

Yes he **warns** them as I emphasized last week, **BUT** in this text the emphasis is on **the overwhelming superiority of their God**. – the emphasis is GRACE!

And when Joshua gets done rehearsing God's grace to them in verses 2-13, the question must be, how could you do anything other than fear and serve the LORD?

Joshua 24:2-13

"This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: `Long ago your forefathers, including Terah the father of Abraham and Nahor, lived beyond the River and worshiped other gods. **But I took your father Abraham from the land** beyond the River and led him throughout Canaan and gave him many descendants. I gave him Isaac, and to Isaac I gave Jacob and Esau. I assigned the hill country of Seir to Esau, but Jacob and his sons went down to Egypt.

"Then I sent Moses and Aaron, and I afflicted the Egyptians by what I did there, and **I brought you out**. When I brought your fathers out of Egypt, you came to the sea, and the Egyptians pursued them with chariots and horsemen as far as the Red Sea. But they cried to the LORD for help, and he put darkness between you and the Egyptians; he brought the sea over them and covered them. You saw with your own eyes what **I did** to the Egyptians. Then you lived in the desert for a long time.

"I brought you to the land of the Amorites who lived east of the Jordan. They fought against you, but **I gave them into your hands**. I destroyed them from before you, and you took possession of their land. When Balak son of Zippor, the king of Moab, prepared to fight against Israel, he sent for Balaam son of Beor to put a curse on you.

But I would not listen to Balaam, so he blessed you again and again, and **I delivered you out of his hand.**

“Then you crossed the Jordan and came to Jericho. The citizens of Jericho fought against you, as did also the Amorites, Perizzites, Canaanites, Hittites, Girgashites, Hivites and Jebusites, but **I gave them into your hands.** I sent the hornet ahead of you, which drove them out before you--also the two Amorite kings. You did not do it with your own sword and bow. So **I gave you a land** on which you did not toil and cities you did not build; and you live in them and eat from vineyards and olive groves that **you** did not plant.”

Earlier I said that worship is about fear and service.

Most religion and most of life is about trying to overcome what we fear, placating the gods, trying to manipulate the system to get what we are convinced we need – protection and pleasure.

And so whether as a religionist or a secularist we work hard to serve the god we think will yield the most.

But what if you learned that there is a God who is not only to be feared and served but a God who genuinely loves you and is not looking for you to earn his favor but to simply respond to his favor?

What if you learned that he has gone ahead of you, making your way, protecting, providing, and all because he loves you?

Joshua reminds them that just as with them, so with Abraham, God didn't choose Abraham because Abraham was worthy of being chosen.

Abraham was an idol-worshipping pagan just like the rest.

But God reached in and chose to be gracious to him.

One man writes, “There is a persistent tendency in the popular Christian mind to look upon folks like Abraham as if they had always been... good, solid, helpful folks to whom no God who had an ounce of wisdom could avoid taking a shine.” But Abraham is as guilty as the rest for his worship of other gods. “All of which goes to show that John Newton was right: grace really is amazing. So amazing that we can't believe it. So we go on concocting our graven images of biblical all-stars, like Abraham, picturing them as worthy fellows already disposed toward God, already on their way to truth, needing only a

little help from God to finish the conversion so nobly begun.” (Dale Davis No Falling Words 189)

But John Calvin reminds us, “Abraham did not emerge from profound ignorance and the abyss of error by his own virtue, but was drawn out by the hand of God.” (Jean Calvin Commentaries on Joshua 273)

There is not a one of us here who deserves the grace of God.

- That we were sought out by God while others were not ought to make us humble and grateful.
- That we were reared in a Christian home or room-mated in college with a Christian who witnessed to us ought to make us realize how much our salvation is only of grace.

We weren't seeking God – God came and found us – He loves us – He loves you.

I haven't time to note each historical incident Joshua reminds them of in this text but I mention just a couple more so that you see clearly what he is doing.

In verses 5-7 he speaks of when they escaped from Egypt but then were cornered by the Egyptian army at the impassable Red Sea.

Joshua says you cried to the Lord for help and **he did** the miraculous which you saw with your own eyes.

In verses 8-10 he reminds them of God's unseen protection of them when unbeknownst to them God was manipulating a prophet by the name of Balaam into blessing the Israelites rather than cursing them as his boss wanted him to do.

In verses 11-13 Joshua reminds them that the victories they have just won in Canaan and even the land they live on and the cities they live in were provided by God – it was not their strength or wisdom but God's promise and provision that has given them all they have.

Author Dale Davis summarizes God's love for Israel (and us) this way:

“Remember how I took you as my own; how I rescued you in your helplessness; how I shielded you from dangers seen and unseen; how I have sustained you with bread and meat until this very day.”

“Oh to grace how great a debtor, **daily** I'm constrained to be.” (Dale Davis

No Falling Words 197

The Apostle Peter put it this way in 1 Peter 1:18-19 “For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.”

Yes, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the Lord of the universe is a fearful God but he loves you and he has proven it over and over again.

And so Joshua says in Joshua 24:14-15 "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. 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 calls for a decision – a choice to be made – which god will you serve?

DICK SIMMONDS TESTIMONY

Joshua calls for a decision and the people respond:
 Joshua 24:16-18 "Far be it from us to forsake the LORD to serve other gods! 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."

It sounds like a choice to me.

It sounds like the kind of profession of faith I would want to here from someone claiming to become a Christ-follower.

But what does Joshua say?

Joshua 24:19-20 "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. 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."

What does Joshua mean when he says, "You are **not able** to serve the Lord?"

He means that no cheap conversion will do, no cheap commitment will do - no one-hour Sunday worship of him and 167 hours of worshipping and serving other gods.

One author I think captures it with these words:

"Don't lightly mouth your profession of faith, Joshua is saying. Don't you realize the sort of God you are dealing with? He is a holy, jealous God. You don't dare come to him thinking, "though it makes him sad to see the way we live, he'll always say, "I forgive you." Yahweh is not a soft, cuddly Santa in the sky who drools over easy decisions during invitation hymns. Joshua seeks to put down that blathering self-confidence that makes emotional commitments rather than shutting its mouth and counting the cost." (Dale Davis 201)

Serving the Lord is not a matter of adding God to your “to do” list.
We cannot have two masters.

True worship is about fear and service of only one God.

Jesus said in Matthew 6:24 "No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money."

Worship “is an expression of total dependence and obedience is the fundamental expression of that **total dependence**” (VanGemeren in Vol 2 Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis p530)

David Howard writes, “Joshua’s “dramatic words here emphasize the solemnity of the requirements (in order) to purge from the Israelites **any false notion** of ‘cheap grace’. Theirs was not to be a nominal, superficial faith. As J.H. Michaelis noted, Israel could not serve the Lord ‘by their own resolution only, and without the assistance of divine grace, without solid and serious conversion from all idols, and without true repentance and faith.’” (Howard NAC Joshua 438)

DEREK SAUCIER TESTIMONY

You’ve heard Dick, you’ve heard Derek, and you’ve heard Joshua.

Joshua 24:14-15 "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. 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."

The choice is clear, Christ’s love is compelling – he gave **his** life.

The cost is great - **your** life, and the result is eternal.

Who do you choose?