

# Choose This Day!



## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *Joshua 24; Gen. 12:7; Deut. 17:19; Deut. 5:6; 1 Kings 11:2, 4, 9; 2 Tim. 4:7, 8.*

**Memory Text:** “‘And if it seems evil to you to serve the LORD, choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve. . . . But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD’ ” (*Joshua 24:15, NKJV*).

**T**he final chapter of Joshua is set in the context of a covenant renewal ceremony, but this time conducted by the aged leader of Israel. Although not a covenant itself but rather a report of a covenant renewal ceremony, the chapter has the elements of ancient Near Eastern suzerainty treaties: (1) a preamble in which the suzerain, the initiator of the treaty, is identified; (2) the historical prologue, which describes the relationship between the overlord and the vassal; (3) the covenant stipulations asking the vassal to manifest total allegiance to the suzerain based on, and motivated by, gratitude; (4) blessings for obedience and curses for breaking the covenant; (5) witnesses to the pledge of the vassal; (6) deposition of the document for future reading; and (7) ratification of the covenant.

Joshua is close to the end of his life; no replacement is on the horizon. The covenant renewal is a reminder to the Israelites that their king is Yahweh Himself and that, if they remain loyal to Him, they will enjoy His protection. Israel does not need a human king. As a theocratic nation, they have to ever keep in mind that their only king is the Lord.

\* *Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, December 27.*

## You Were There!

“Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem and called for the elders of Israel, for their heads, for their judges, and for their officers; and they presented themselves before God” (*Josh. 24:1, NKJV*).

Shechem was the place where Abraham had built an altar upon his arrival in the land and where God first gave him the promise of the land (*Gen. 12:6, 7*). Now, when the promises given to Abraham have been fulfilled, Israel renews the covenant with God at the very place where the first promise had been given. The appeal of Joshua recalls the words of Jacob to “‘put away the foreign gods which are among you’ ” (*Josh. 24:23, NKJV; compare with Gen. 35:2–4*). The geography of the event in and of itself conveys the call to demonstrate undivided loyalty to the Lord, rejecting all other “gods.”

**Read** Joshua 24:2–13. What is the main thrust of God’s message to Israel?

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God is the main subject of the reviewed past: “I took,” “I gave,” “I sent,” “I plagued,” “I did,” “I brought you out,” “I delivered you,” and so on. Israel is not the main protagonist of the narrative but rather its object. It is God who created Israel. Had not God intervened in the life of Abraham, they would have been serving the same idols. Israel’s existence as a nation is not the merit of any of its ancestors but the exclusive work of God’s grace. The fact that the Israelites are settled in the land is not a ground for boasting but the very reason why they should serve God.

The Lord’s speech contains a shift that occurs five times between “you” and “they” (the fathers). The fathers and this generation at Shechem are treated as one. Joshua is seeking to show what Moses affirmed already in Deuteronomy 5:3, that the Lord did not make the covenant only with the fathers but with all those present at the moment of Joshua’s speech. The vast majority there now had not experienced the Exodus. Not “all” of them were at Horeb. Yet, Joshua says that all of them were there. In short, the lessons of the past must be appropriated by each new generation. The God who worked for the ancestors in the past is ready to act on behalf of the present generation.

**What are ways in which we can, as a church, have a better sense of corporate responsibility—that is, grasp the idea that what we do impacts everyone in the church?**

## In Sincerity and Truth

**What** did Joshua appeal to the Israelites to do (*Josh. 24:14, 15*)? What does it mean to serve the Lord in sincerity and in truth?

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Joshua's appeal clearly expresses the fact that the Israelites have to decide whether, through loyalty to their Creator, to keep their uniqueness and live in the land or to fade back into being one among many idolatrous peoples, with no clear identity, purpose, or mission. The choice is theirs.

Joshua's appeal is twofold: Israel should fear the Lord and serve Him "in sincerity and in truth." To fear the Lord does not mean a life of perpetual trembling and emotional insecurity. It rather refers to the reverence and awe that stem from the recognition of the unfathomable greatness, holiness, and infinity of God on the one hand and our smallness, sinfulness, and finitude on the other. To fear God is a constant awareness of the magnitude of His demands, a recognition that He is not only our heavenly Father but also our Divine King. Such awareness will lead to a life of obedience to God (*Lev. 19:14, Lev. 25:17, Deut. 17:19, 2 Kings 17:34*). While "fear" describes the inner attitude that must characterize an Israelite, the practical outcome of reverence to God is service.

The service that is required of Israel is characterized by two Hebrew terms: "in sincerity" and "in truth." The first term (*tamim*) is mostly used as an adjective to describe the perfection of the sacrificial animal. The second term that describes Israel's service is "truth," or "faithfulness" (Heb. *'emet*). The term generally connotes constancy and stability. It usually refers to God, whose character is intrinsically characterized by faithfulness, which is manifested toward Israel.

A faithful person is somebody who is dependable and trustworthy. Basically, Joshua is asking Israel to demonstrate the same loyalty to God that God has displayed toward His people in the course of their history. It is not merely outward compliance to His requirements but what springs from an undivided inner consistency of the heart. Their lives should reflect gratefulness to God for what He has done for them. Basically, it is how we today should relate to Jesus, as well.

**What does it mean to you to serve the Lord "in sincerity" and "in truth"? What are some of the distracting factors in your life that prevent your full devotion to God?**

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## Free to Serve

As a true and faithful leader, Joshua respects the free will of his people and wishes that Israel would serve the Lord out of free choice rather than compulsion. That was exactly the point made by the deliberate use of the verb “chosen” (*see Josh. 24:22*). In other passages *bahar*, “to choose,” describes Yahweh’s election of Israel (*Deut. 7:6, 7; Deut. 10:15; Deut. 14:2*). Israel is free to say “no” to Yahweh after their divine election, but that would be nonsensical and absurd. Israel can say “yes” to God and continue to live, or they can turn their backs on Him and cease to exist.

**What** was Israel’s response to Joshua’s appeal (*Josh. 24:16–18*)? **Why** do you think Joshua reacted to their answer in the way he did (*Josh. 24:19–21*)?

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In their categorically positive answer, the Israelites recognize that the God of the patriarchs and of their fathers is now also “our God” (*Josh. 24:17, 18, NKJV*), whom they are willing to serve with undivided allegiance. After such an unquestionable affirmation of their loyalty, we would expect words of affirmation and encouragement from Joshua. However, this is not the case. The dialogue between Joshua and the people takes a radical turn in which Joshua seems to play the role of the devil’s advocate. He shifts from speaking about God’s gracious providence in the past to threatening the Israelites with a picture of a God who is not easy to serve.

Joshua knows the instability of the first generation, who promised to obey God in similar terms (*Exod. 19:8, Exod. 24:3, Deut. 5:27*) yet who forgot their promises while the words were still on their lips (*Exodus 32*). Thus, Joshua, by means of rhetoric, wants to make the Israelites aware of several things. *First*, the decision to serve God is a serious one. It will have to shape the entire nation according to God’s revelation. The blessings of pursuing that goal are evident, but the consequences of disobedience must also be fully understood. Forgiveness of sins is not an unalienable right of humanity but a miracle of God’s grace.

*Second*, the decision of the Israelites to serve God must be their own decision, not something imposed by a leader, even Joshua.

*Third*, Israel must realize that humans cannot serve God in their own strength. Serving God is not achieved by a mechanical adherence to the stipulations of the covenant but by a personal relationship with the saving Lord (*compare with Exod. 20:1, 2; Deut. 5:6, 7*).

## The Dangers of Idolatry

**Read** Joshua 24:22–24. Why would Joshua need to repeat his appeal to the Israelites to get rid of their idols?

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The threat of idolatry is not a theoretical one. Earlier, on the plains of Moab, in a similar context, Moses asked for the same decision (*Deut.* 30:19, 20). The gods that are in view now are not the ones of Egypt or those beyond the river, but they are found “among them.” Therefore, Joshua pleads with his people to incline their hearts to the Lord. The Hebrew term used here, *natah*, means “to stretch,” “to bend.” It describes a God who is expected to bend down and listen to prayers (*2 Kings* 19:16; *Ps.* 31:2, 3; *Dan.* 9:18), and it is also the attitude required of Israel later by the prophets (*Isa.* 55:3, *Jer.* 7:24). It is employed to indicate the apostasy of Solomon when his heart inclined toward foreign gods (*1 Kings* 11:2, 4, 9). The sinful human heart does not have the natural tendency to bend and listen to God’s voice. It takes conscious decisions on our part to incline it toward fulfilling God’s will.

The Israelites’ answer literally reads: “We will listen to His voice.” This expression emphasizes the relational aspect of obedience. Israel is not asked to routinely follow lifeless rules. The covenant is about a living relationship with the Lord, which cannot be fully expressed by mere regulations. Israel’s religion was never intended to be legalistic; rather, it was to be a constant conversation in faith and love with a holy and merciful Savior.

Even after the people’s threefold promise to serve the Lord, which implies, as Joshua commanded, the removal of foreign gods from among them, there is no report that it actually happened. Throughout the entire book, it became customary to report on the fulfillment of Joshua’s commands (or those of Moses) as examples of obedience. The lack of it now at the end of the book leaves the plea of Joshua open-ended. The central appeal of the book to serve the Lord is not only for Joshua’s generation but also for each new generation of God’s people who would read or hear this message.

**How often have you promised the Lord you would do something, but then you didn’t? Why didn’t you? What does your answer tell you about grace?**

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## Finishing Well

**Read** the concluding words of the book of Joshua written by an inspired editor (*Josh. 24:29–33*). How are these words not only looking back to Joshua's life but also looking forward to the future?

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In the epilogue reporting on the deaths of Joshua and Eleazar, the high priest brings the book of Joshua to a sobering end. By recounting together the burial of Joshua, the burial of Eleazar, and the burial of Joseph's bones, the author creates a contrast between the life outside the land and the beginning of life in the land. There is no need to wander anymore. The earthly remains of the leaders don't have to be carried along with them. The patriarchs buried their relatives in a cave (*Gen. 23:13, 19; Gen. 25:9, 10*), on a plot purchased at Shechem (*Gen. 33:19*). Now the nation buries its leaders in the territory of their own inheritance, thus having a sense of permanence. The promises given to the patriarchs have been fulfilled. Yahweh's faithfulness constitutes the historical thread that links Israel's posterity to its present and future.

As the concluding paragraphs of the book link the whole narrative to a larger story in the past, they also open the way for the future. Ex-archbishop of Canterbury Lord George Cary, in a keynote speech delivered at Holy Trinity Church in Shrewsbury, declared that the Anglican Church was "one generation away from extinction."

In fact, the church is always one generation away from extinction, and so it was with the Old Testament people of God. A great chapter in the history of Israel comes to an end. Its future depends on what kind of answers it will give to the many questions that concern the future. Will Israel be loyal to the Lord? Will they be able to continue the unfinished task of possessing the whole land? Will they be able to cling to Yahweh and not get entangled in idol worship? A generation under Joshua has been faithful to the Lord, but will the next generation maintain the same spiritual direction that has been traced by its great leader? Each successive generation of God's people, reading the book of Joshua, must face these same questions. Their success depends on the nature of the answers they provide in their everyday lives and how they relate to the truths they have inherited.

**Joshua, like Paul, "fought the good fight" (2 Tim. 4:7, NKJV). What was the key to Joshua's success? What decisions do you need to make today in order to finish with the same assurance of salvation?**

**Further Thought:** Read Ellen G. White, “The Last Words of Joshua,” pp. 522–524, in *Patriarchs and Prophets*.

“Among the multitudes that came up out of Egypt were many who had been worshipers of idols; and such is the power of habit that the practice was secretly continued, to some extent, even after the settlement in Canaan. Joshua was sensible of this evil among the Israelites, and he clearly perceived the dangers that would result. He earnestly desired to see a thorough reformation among the Hebrew host. He knew that unless the people took a decided stand to serve the Lord with all their hearts, they would continue to separate themselves farther and farther from Him. . . . While a portion of the Hebrew host were spiritual worshipers, many were mere formalists; no zeal or earnestness characterized their service. Some were idolaters at heart, who would be ashamed to acknowledge themselves as such.”—Ellen G. White, *Signs of the Times*, May 19, 1881.

“This solemn covenant was recorded in the book of the law, to be sacredly preserved. Joshua then set up a great stone under an oak that was by the sanctuary of the Lord. ‘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.’ Here Joshua plainly declares that his instructions and warnings to the people were not his own words, but the words of God. This great stone would stand to testify to succeeding generations of the event which it was set up to commemorate, and would be a witness against the people, should they ever again degenerate into idolatry.”—Ellen G. White, *Signs of the Times*, May 26, 1881.

## Discussion Questions:

- 1 Discuss the meaning of the expression: “He [the LORD] is a holy God. He is a jealous God” (*Josh. 24:19, NKJV*). In what sense is God a jealous God?
- 2 How is our love for God connected to the freedom of choice that He grants us? That is, could we truly love if we didn’t truly have freedom? Can true love ever be forced? If not, why not?
- 3 What are some practical ways that leaders of the church today can pass on the torch to the next generation?
- 4 Think about the life of Joshua and the conclusion that in all his life the Israelites served the Lord. What conclusion would you like people to draw about your life?

## “How Do We Love God?”

Kim Sun, a missionary from South Korea, shared 15 stories of God’s love with the residents of a remote town in the Philippines for three months.

The townspeople were amazed to learn that God created everything in the world for them. They marveled at God’s love in the parables of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son. Their hearts were touched to realize that Jesus died on the cross for them. After three months, many said, “We understand that God loves us. But how can we respond? How do we love God?”

“It’s so true,” Sun thought in amazement. “When we know someone loves us, we want to show the love in return.” It was time to dig deeper into the Bible.

For the next three months, he taught about the seventh-day Sabbath, clean and unclean food, tithe and offerings, and other Seventh-day Adventist fundamental beliefs. Many townspeople accepted what they learned. They wanted to know how to love God, and the doctrines showed the way.

Sun served as a missionary for 10 months: offering three months of labor, free of charge, three months of stories about God’s love, and three months of digging deeper into the Bible. That left one month to say goodbye. Sun spent the last month going door-to-door, inviting people to follow Jesus. “I’m leaving soon,” he said. “I would like you to join my church. I’ve been so blessed, and I’d like you to be blessed, too.” Many townspeople accepted his invitation.

Ellen White says, “Christ’s method alone will give true success in reaching the people. The Savior mingled with men as one who desired their good. He showed sympathy for them, ministered to their needs, and won their confidence. Then He bade them, ‘Follow Me’” (*The Ministry of Healing*, p. 143). For ten months, Sun practiced Christ’s method: mingling with people, desiring their good, showing sympathy, ministering to their needs, and winning their confidence; then he invited them to follow Jesus.

Today, Sun is a full-time missionary. He works as associate director of the 1000 Missionary Movement, an organization that is part of the Seventh-day Adventist Church’s Southern Asia-Pacific Division. He trains hundreds of missionaries every year at its headquarters, built with the help of a 1996



Thirteenth Sabbath Offering, in Silang, Philippines. “Being a missionary is the highest calling,” he said. “Missionaries don’t only give Bible studies. We especially need to show Jesus in our lives.”

*Just as the 1996 Thirteenth Sabbath Offering is still being felt across the Southern Asia-Pacific Division and beyond through the work of the 1000 Missionary Movement, this quarter’s Thirteenth Sabbath Offering can, with God’s blessing, also have a long-lasting impact. Thank you for your generous offering this Sabbath.*