

Values

Decisions Reflect Our Values

Focal Verses: Joshua 24:1-3, 13-15, 21-24¹

Aim for Change

By the end of the lesson, we will: **AFFIRM** our loyalty to God and God alone; **RESOLVE** to put God first in all things; and **COMMIT** to obeying His teachings and commandments.

In Focus

Bryce sighed as he saw his supervisor approaching with a stack of files. He hoped to leave work on time, but this was the end of the fiscal year, which meant crunch time at his accounting firm. For the next four weeks, Bryce knew he would be working longer-than-usual hours and wouldn't get to do what he really loved, which was acting.

He came alive whenever he performed on stage or before the cameras, even if he was just a face in a crowd scene or had a single line in a TV commercial. Making a living as an actor, however, required constant effort offstage. He constantly needed to update his demo reel, social media, and photos. Bryce had to continuously look for casting notices, attend auditions, and go to acting classes when he could spare the money and the time. Working at the accounting firm was steady, but Bryce struggled to focus on numbers when he wanted to be in rehearsal. Bryce thought about concentrating full time on acting, but the fear of being broke always made him push that thought aside. However, he fought fear today and decided to step out on faith.

Bryce remembered the first time his mother saw him act in the church production of The Best Christmas Pageant Ever. He was 12 years old, and his Mom was in the front row, smiling at his every word. When it was over, she told him, "You have a gift from God, son. I am so blessed to see you use it." Bryce knew his Mom would not be happy to see him behind a desk going through the motions. He needed to make a decision that reflected the important values his Mom taught him, which was to use the talents God gave him to the fullest.

Can we do our best for God if we put our energy into things God has not called us to do?

Keep In Mind

¹ Excerpt From Precepts for Living® Dr. Vince L., Bantu

And if it seems evil to you to serve the Lord, choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of ^{le}the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.” (Joshua 24:15, NKJV)

Lesson Text

Joshua 24:1-3, 13-15, 21-24

1 And Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem and called for the elders of Israel and for their heads and for their judges and for their officers; and they presented themselves before God.

2 And Joshua said unto all the people, "Thus saith the Lord God of Israel: 'Your fathers dwelt on the other side of the river in old time, even Terah, the father of Abraham and the father of Nahor; and they served other gods.

13 And I have given you a land for which ye did not labor and cities which ye built not, and ye dwell in them. Of the vineyards and olive yards which ye planted not do ye eat.'

14 "Now therefore, fear the Lord, and serve Him in sincerity and in truth; and put away the gods which your fathers served on the other side of the river and in Egypt, and serve ye the Lord.

15 And if it seem evil unto you to serve the Lord, choose you this day whom ye will serve, whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the river, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land ye dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

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 for yourselves 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."

The People, Places and Times

Shechem: The name means “shoulder,” or “back.” Shechem is both a district and a city in the hill country of Ephraim in northern Palestine. Shechem was the first capital of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Rehoboam, successor to King Solomon, went to Shechem to be crowned king over all of Israel. Samaria eventually became the permanent capital of the Northern Kingdom. It was at Shechem that Jesus visited with the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s Well.

Idol: A graven image or representation of a god or goddess. In the context of the Bible, idolatry or worshiping idols is the great departure from God’s will that opens the door for all other sins; it is breaking the first commandment (Exodus 20:3–4). The Israelites throughout Scripture give in to temptation to worship the gods of the nations around them that represent fertility, fruitfulness, weather, power, wealth, and other natural forces. For the Christian, an idol can be anything in our lives that is given more trust and attention than God.

Background

The ancient Israelites' journey across the Jordan River into the promised land of Canaan is chronicled in the book of Joshua. As directed by God, Joshua provided guidance to the twelve tribes during this critical time in their history. Arrival in Canaan is an important moment in their history because this is the land God promised to their ancestors (Genesis 12:1–7). The conquest of this land occurred after the Israelites were attacked; they had to fight for what they knew God promised them generations ago. The land was divided among the tribes, and Joshua called two national assemblies. The setting of the assembly recorded in today's passage was Shechem, the heart of the Promised Land. This historically significant city was the prime setting for Joshua to lead a covenant ceremony among the Israelites. During the ceremony, Joshua stood as a prophet reminding them of God's promise and provision. The Israelites voluntarily chose to take a vow of personal piety by turning their backs to idols and foreign gods. They made personal commitments to love and serve the God of Israel.

What are examples of modern idols or false gods we put before God?

In Depth

1. Remembering God's Promise (Joshua 24:1–3) Joshua assembled the twelve tribes and their governing officials before God. Joshua has already built an altar and engaged in a covenant ceremony in Shechem (Joshua 8:30–35). Shechem functions as a sanctuary for the ancient Israelite people. The prophet prepares the Israelites to engage corporately in a vow renewal ceremony by first reminding them of God's initial promise to multiply Abraham's offspring (Genesis 12:1–3).

Abraham was worshipping idols before God revealed Himself to Abraham as the true God. Yet after this encounter, the descendants of Abraham chose to turn back to idols. This choice had a negative effect on their descendants' future. The distraction of foreign gods delayed their possession of God's promise.

Joshua reminds the people assembled in Shechem how a bad decision by their ancestors affected the history of their people.

How have distractions delayed the fulfillment of God's promises in your life?

2. Recognizing God's Provision (Joshua 24:13–15) We learn that God's promises always come with God's provision. God not only gave the Israelites the Canaanite land as promised, but also

provided already-built towns and fruit-bearing plants. God ensured their basic food and shelter needs were met in Canaan prior to their arrival.

Verse 13 shows us an example of God's unconditional love and generosity despite ourselves. God did not default on the promise, because the Israelites turned to serve other gods. The Creator's back is never turned on us. Instead, God loves us through our wrong decisions and always keeps His promises. Thankfully, God does what He promises!

After recognizing God's provision, Joshua challenges the Israelites to make a necessary decision. The prophet asks to whom they will offer their sincere and faithful worship. Ultimately, this covenant renewal ceremony is an opportunity to correct the wrong decisions of their ancestors. Joshua takes a stand and declares his household will break the family tradition and serve the Lord.

In your experience, how have you been challenged to turn away from idols and toward God?

3. Reaffirming Our Piety (Joshua 24:21–24) In response to God's promise and provision, the Israelites must decide if they will either continue serving idols or wholeheartedly serve God. The people respond to Joshua's challenge by publicly committing to serve the Lord. Making this public declaration with other believers is important for two reasons. First, the people voluntarily choose God. They are not forced to enter into relationship with God and neither are we. We must resist the temptation of idols and commit to serving God daily. Second, witnessing others reaffirm the vow creates a sense of accountability. We cannot live out our faith on our own. We ought to surround ourselves with believers, who share similar commitments. After reaffirming their vow to God, the Israelites are encouraged to repent by Joshua. They had to turn away from their idols completely. We cannot wholeheartedly serve God if our practices are to serve the world or serve ourselves. Our heart and actions must be in alignment with God when renewing our vows.

How does this covenant ceremony relate or compare to modern-day renewal ceremonies (wedding vows, the Lord's Supper)?

Liberating Lesson

It might be time to renew our vow to love and serve God considering the political climate in the U.S., the growing tensions among nations around the world, and the numerous acts of injustice faced by Black and Brown people daily in our communities. This is not a reference to just any God, but the God of justice, who sides with the oppressed. As we incline our ear to the heart of

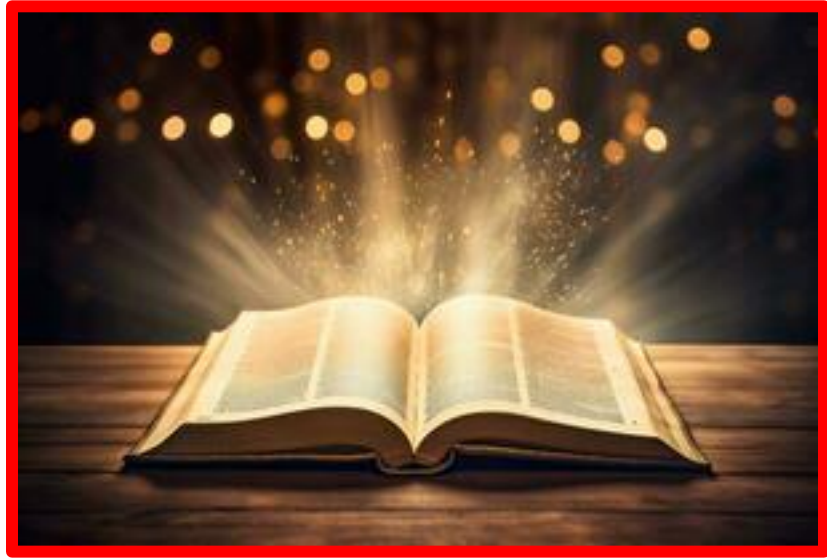
the Lord, we should pay close attention to how God is calling us to serve oppressed people. We are called to stand up against injustice to ensure that all of God's people have access to His promises.

Application for Activation

While work, family, hobbies, relationships, and other commitments require our time, nothing should be prioritized before God. Spending excessive amounts of time watching television, working extra hours, and traveling can turn our attention away from God. Each of these commitments can become idols. One way to indicate which distractions prevent us from loving and serving God with our whole heart is to take a personal inventory of how we use our time. Make a schedule of how your time is spent in a typical week. How much time is devoted to loving and serving God? Is your time well-balanced?

Closing Prayer

Daily Bible Reading



Monday: Exodus 32-39, Psalm 17

Tuesday: Exodus 35-37, Psalm 18:1-5

Wednesday: Exodus 38-40, Psalm 18:6-13

Thursday: Leviticus 1-4, Psalm 18:14-19

Friday: Leviticus 5-7, Psalm 18:20-29

Saturday: Leviticus 8-10, Psalm 18:30-39

Sunday: Leviticus 11-13, Psalm 18:40-50