

# Vital Decision

IN HIS FAREWELL ADDRESS, JOSHUA CHALLENGED THE PEOPLE TO CHOOSE THE LORD OVER THE GODS OF THE CANAANITES.

In 1796 at the end of his second term as president of the United States, George Washington wrote a farewell address to the nation. It was not delivered as a speech, but written as a letter. In his farewell address, President Washington asked Americans to set aside certain things like excessive loyalty to political factions, and encouraged the people of the United States to stay out of foreign entanglements. He also encouraged the nation to embrace the public good over private interests.

At the close of the book of Joshua, Joshua bluntly told the people that he was getting old and about to die. As all the tribes had received their allotted lands and were about to go their separate ways, Joshua presented them with a choice. They had to decide and decide today whether to follow the gods of the Canaanites, or to rid themselves of these gods and follow the Lord alone (24:14-15). Israel unanimously swore allegiance to the Lord, but Joshua was not at all sure they were up to the task. Nevertheless, they promised to commit themselves to the Lord, and he accepted their choice (vv. 16-24).

As we come to this last session in Joshua, I have been overwhelmed by the pressures that must have weighed upon Joshua as he led his people over his long lifetime. At the beginning of the book, the Lord bluntly told Joshua what he already knew. Moses was dead. That meant it was now Joshua's time, his moment in history to assume leadership of God's people. God commanded Joshua to lead the people across the Jordan River. And God promised that He had given them all the land of Canaan. Yet they still had to take it. Three times in the first chapter of Joshua, the Lord challenged Joshua to be strong and courageous (1:6,7,9). Now as he approached the end of his life, I believe he knew that he had been a faithful leader.

It is so rare for a person to successfully carry on the vision of his or her predecessor. Legacies can vanish, seemingly overnight. Organizations tend to lose the vision of their founder very quickly after the death of their originator. Moses and Joshua, along with Elijah and Elisha, are positive examples from the Bible of individuals who faithfully carried on

the vision of their predecessor. Jesus Himself entrusted His mission to twelve apprentices. They faltered often, yet ultimately proved faithful to God's call.

Joshua promised that his family would serve the Lord; the people also had to make a choice. Whom would they serve?



## Joshua 22:1–24:33

The book of Joshua closes with three speeches by Joshua (22:1-8; 23:1-16; 24:1-24). These three speeches are made in succession by Joshua to the eastern tribes, then Israel's leaders, and finally all Israel gathered at Shechem. All three of Joshua's speeches are filled with Deuteronomic language such as the use of admonitions to love the Lord, walking in His ways, and keep His commands. These speeches also parallel Moses's speeches in Deuteronomy 1-4; 5-28; and 29-33.

In Joshua's first speech (22:1-8), Israel's unity remained paramount. After the war to claim the promised land was fulfilled, Joshua blessed the eastern tribes, telling them to return to their land east of the Jordan River and remain faithful to the Lord. When they returned to their land, the eastern tribes built an impressive altar as a witness to future generations that these tribes were part of Israel and had a share in the worship of the Lord (vv. 11,21-29). The western tribes misinterpreted these actions as the eastern tribes rebelling against the Lord and prepared for war (vv. 11-20). Fortunately, they sent a delegation to the eastern tribes which peacefully resolved the misunderstanding (vv. 30-34).

Joshua's second speech (23:1-16) was a farewell address given a long time after the conquest of the land when Joshua was 110 years old (24:29). He knew that he was approaching his own death. Joshua urged the Israelites to trust in the Lord to give them victory over the remaining peoples that still had to be conquered (23:3-5). They were to remain faithful to the Lord, avoiding idolatry in regard to the other nations around them (vv. 6-11) lest the Lord judge them (vv. 12-16).

Regarding Joshua's final speech (24:1-24), Joshua had assembled all the Israelites at Shechem. This 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). Years later, after being reunited with his

brother Esau, Jacob purchase a plot of land at Shechem, settled there, and erected an altar to the God of Israel (33:18-20).

The first thirteen verses include a historical recital of the scope of Israel's history to this point. It begins with Abraham and the other ancestors of Israel, then jumps several centuries to Moses and Aaron, who led Israel out of Egypt, and finally to Israel's defeat of the Amorites and Moabites as they approached their target, Canaan. This historical survey then focuses on Israel crossing the Jordan and driving out the Canaanite inhabitants of the land. It ends with God's emphasis that He gave Israel a land that they did not work for and cities they did not build.

It is in this context that we approach our focal passage. After our focal passage, where Israel promised to serve the Lord, Joshua recorded all these things in the law of God, and set another stone monument next to the sanctuary. Like the witness the eastern tribe erected in chapter 22, this stone witness was a testimony that Israel had indeed heard "all the words the LORD said to us" (24:27). Joshua died, and they buried him in his allotted land. Joseph's bones, which Israel had brought up from Egypt, were buried at Shechem. Eleazar the priest died as well, and was buried in his allotted land (vv. 25-33).



## Challenge (Josh. 24:14-18)

Joshua's challenge gathers key themes throughout the book. Because the Lord brought Israel out of Egypt into the land of promise, and because God had given the twelve tribes allotments throughout the land, Joshua urged all the people to make a choice as to whom they would ultimately serve. Would it be the gods of the land they inherited or would it be the Lord?

### VERSE 14

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**“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.”**

The covenant ceremony was rooted in the long record of God's faithfulness to the Israelites recounted in the first thirteen verses of Joshua 24.

From Abraham to the conquest of Jericho, God proved Himself capable of handing over all Israel's enemies. Verse 13 summarizes, "I gave you a land you did not labor for and cities you did not build."

Joshua commanded the people to **fear the LORD**. Joshua's language revisits the language of Deuteronomy 6 (Deut. 6:2,13,24). Moses told the Israelites that God would bring them into a land full of big, beautiful cities (6:10-12; see Josh. 24:13). He urged them to be careful not to forget the Lord, but rather to fear the Lord (Deut. 6:12-13).

The Israelites were to get rid of the gods their ancestors had served. Joshua mentioned two places known for prior false worship: **beyond the Euphrates River** and **in Egypt**. *Beyond the Euphrates River* (lit. "beyond the River") likely refers to Haran—Abraham's home before he journeyed to Canaan. Since the *Euphrates River* was by far the largest river in Mesopotamia, some translations like the CSB clarify with the word *Euphrates*. The Nile River in *Egypt* was another waterway that was associated with infamous foreign gods from Israel's past.

#### VERSE 15

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**"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? As for me and my family, we will worship the LORD."**

The expression, "**choose for yourselves today**," echoes the language from Deuteronomy 30, the chapter that comes up right before Joshua took over for Moses. Moses urged the people to choose life so that they wouldn't perish in the land God was about to give them. Joshua presented the same choice to all Israel at Shechem. The Hebrew expression rendered "**if it doesn't please you to worship the LORD**" can be more literally translated, "if it is evil in your eyes to serve Yahweh."

Israel was faced with three choices for their worship: the old ancestral gods of their homeland in Mesopotamia, the new Canaanite gods of the Amorites, or Yahweh, the God of their ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Others in the book of Joshua had faced the same choice. Rahab set an example by abandoning the old gods (Josh. 2). What would Israel do?

Joshua knew his death was near. So, he left the decision for their future in the hands of the people. But for him personally, the choice had already been made, "**As for me and my family, we will worship the LORD.**"

## VERSE 16

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**The people replied, “We will certainly not abandon the LORD to worship other gods!”**

Israel is referred to as **the people**. Most often, the expression refers to the descendants of the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob with whom God chose to enter into covenant. The word *people* can also refer to the nation Israel or to the foreign nations that surrounded Israel.

This verse relays the people’s first response, which is very emphatic in Hebrew: **“We will certainly not abandon the LORD.”** They also promised not to **worship other gods**. The expression *other gods* is found in the Ten Commandments: “Do not have other gods besides me” (Ex. 20:3; Deut. 5:7). Furthermore, this verse is immersed in the language of Deuteronomy 6, “Do not follow other gods, the gods of the peoples around you” (Deut. 6:14). This commitment is echoed in the Psalms. “There must not be a strange god among you; you must not bow down to a foreign god” (Ps. 81:9).

## VERSE 17

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**“For the LORD our God brought us and our ancestors out of the land of Egypt, out of the place of slavery, and performed these great signs before our eyes. He also protected us all along the way we went and among all the peoples whose lands we traveled through.”**

This verse reads much like a confession of faith. The people explained why they promised to commit themselves in steadfast loyalty to the Lord. God’s deliverance of Israel in the exodus and His providence through the wilderness journey motivated their obedience. This generation was part of their ancestral past. The expression **brought us and our ancestors out** (Lev. 11:45; 2 Kings 17:7; Jer. 2:6) emphasizes that it was God who delivered the Israelites out of Egypt.

**“The LORD our God”** is covenant language. This is also intimately personal language, repeated again in the next verse. The expression springs from perhaps the most famous verse in the Old Testament, a passage that was placed carefully on every doorpost of every home. “The LORD our God, the LORD is one” (Deut. 6:4). God had brought Israel out of the place of slavery. He performed **great signs** Israel saw with their own eyes. Again, the language is reminiscent of Deuteronomy, “You saw with your own eyes the great trials and those great signs and wonders” (29:3). Many in this generation had not personally witnessed the exodus from

Egypt itself, but they had witnessed God’s miraculous provision for Israel in the wilderness, and God’s defeat of the kings of Ammon and Moab.

## VERSE 18

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**“The LORD drove out before us all the peoples, including the Amorites who lived in the land. We too will worship the LORD, because he is our God.”**

**The LORD** had driven **all the peoples** of Canaan out of the land. Broadly, the **Amorites** were the inhabitants of Syria and western Mesopotamia. The various peoples had dominated Canaan for 400 years, from the time of Abraham to the period of the conquest. Sihon and Og were two Amorite kings Israel defeated on their way to Canaan. When used more narrowly, Amorites was a catch-all name for the diverse peoples of Canaan. The Amorites were polytheistic and worshiped false gods such as Amurru, Sin, Marduk, and Dagan.

Joshua had already drawn a line in the sand. His family would worship the Lord. Now, the Israelites promised to do the same thing, using again the same covenant language, **“He is our God.”**

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### **Explore Further**

Read the article “Covenants” on pages 355–360 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What are some of the examples of the most noticeable biblical covenants in the Bible? How did a person “buy in” to a covenant with God? What were some specific parts of the various covenants with God?

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### **Warning** (Josh. 24:19-24)

The covenant ceremony at Shechem (Josh. 24:1) testified to God’s faithfulness, and Israel was to respond by being faithful to the Lord their God. However, like Moses before him, Joshua lacked the confidence that Israel would be committed to living out their promise to follow the Lord (Deut. 31:24-30). Joshua warned the Israelites that peace in the land was dependent on their faithfulness to the covenant.

## VERSE 19

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**But Joshua told the people, “You will not be able to worship the LORD, because he is a holy God. He is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions and sins.”**

Joshua was suspicious. The people said exactly what they needed to say. But he knew that the actual follow-through on those words would probably be another matter entirely. Joshua bluntly responded to the people, **“You will not be able to worship the LORD.”** Moses had said basically the same thing (Deut. 31:29). They both rightly suspected that after their deaths, Israel would turn away from the path God had commanded them to follow. Joshua feared that disaster would come to Israel in the future because of their inclination to return to other gods.

Verse 19 teaches two theological truths: God is a **holy God**. God is a **jealous God**. The holiness of God refers to the unparalleled majesty of God’s incomparable essence and His flawless moral purity (Isa. 6:1-5; Rev. 4:1-11). God’s holiness is the root of His repudiation of sin. The jealousy of God speaks to His strong desire for exclusive devotion and unbridled commitment to keeping His covenant. This is not petty jealousy, but rather an expression of God’s divine nature. God simply will not tolerate unfaithfulness (Nah. 1:2-3).

But verse 19 also teaches a third theological truth, and it’s a stunner. He is an unforgiving God, **“He will not forgive your transgressions and sins.”** How are we to understand this in light of such wonderful promises like Exodus 34:6, “The LORD is a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger and abounding in faithful love and truth.” The Lord forgives iniquity, rebellion, and sin but will not leave the guilty unpunished. Deuteronomy 29:18-21 also says God will not be willing to forgive the person that worships other gods. His anger and jealousy will burn. “If [God’s] people persisted in rebellion in spite of [His] loving and sustained overtures, he would not tolerate this forever.”<sup>1</sup>

## VERSE 20

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**“If you abandon the LORD and worship foreign gods, he will turn against you, harm you, and completely destroy you, after he has been good to you.”**

Verse 20 uses three vivid verbs to describe what will happen if Israel abandons **the LORD** and worships **foreign gods**. God would **turn against**. God would **harm**. God would **completely destroy**. These eye-popping verbs reveal the theological tension between God’s love

and God’s wrath. Both are expressions of God’s nature, not emotional feelings. The tables will turn. Momentum will shift. The blessings will become curses

Verse 20 contains a conditional clause, **“If you abandon the LORD and worship foreign gods.”** God had **been good to** Israel. This conditional clause highlights the severity of the Israelites’ own personal choices. Human choices bear consequences for good or evil. Personal decisions reflect our commitment to God or the lack thereof. Our choices are real and so are the consequences of our choices.

## VERSE 21

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**“No!” the people answered Joshua. “We will worship the LORD.”**

The people cut Joshua off, **“No! . . . We will worship the LORD.”** They professed they would worship and follow the Lord unconditionally. Whether their actions would fall in line with their words would remain to be seen.

The book of Judges shows that Israel failed miserably, much like we ourselves fail, at remaining faithful to the commitments they were making here to the Lord. Judges presents a seemingly never-ending cycle of sin, oppression, and deliverance, as Israel could not seem to help themselves from straying into the worship of other gods.

## VERSE 22

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**Joshua then told the people, “You are witnesses against yourselves that you yourselves have chosen to worship the LORD.” “We are witnesses,” they said.**

Here lies the ragged edge of covenant renewal. Like the testimony of a single witness who changes the whole course of a trial, Israel’s testimony would go on record and be used for or against them. Israel’s own words attested to the importance of this binding covenant. They were not just witnesses, but were **witnesses against** themselves. Once again, they affirmed, **“We are witnesses.”** Jesus Himself used these words, “you are witnesses,” against the Pharisees to charge them that they were just like their ancestors who killed the prophets (Luke 11:48).

Covenants are among the most important themes in the Bible. They are part of God’s mission to restore humanity to relationship with Him. God enters into covenant relationships with human beings. There are five key covenants and each is associated with a particular person: Noah,

Abraham, Moses, David, and Jesus. In this case, the people promised to abide by the Mosaic covenant, and to remain faithful to the law that Moses himself received from God at Mount Sinai. The covenant boiled down to a choice. The power of personal choice is essential for spiritual growth. Freedom is found in making godly conscious choices.

#### VERSE 23

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**“Then get rid of the foreign gods that are among you and turn your hearts to the LORD, the God of Israel.”**

In spite of their emphatic promise, the Israelites needed to act on that promise by getting rid of **the foreign gods** amongst them. Frankly, it is a little surprising that they still had not done this already. They had yet to truly turn their hearts toward the Lord. Their words said yes. What would their actions be? As James wrote in his letter, “For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead” (Jas. 2:26).

The Hebrew word for **get rid of** means to turn away from one’s course. It was used by Jacob when he told his family to get rid of their foreign gods. They gave him all their foreign idols and he hid them under the oak at Shechem (Gen. 35:2-4). This is the same language used by Samuel when he told the people of Israel to put away their foreign gods (1 Sam. 7:3). And an angel of the Lord used this expression when he told a later high priest also named Joshua to take off his filthy clothes, and God would dress him in festive garments (Zech. 3:4).

The expression **God of Israel** appears about fifteen times in the book of Joshua. The phrase was first used by the patriarch Jacob after he purchased a section of a field from a man at Shechem, built an altar, and called it, “God, the God of Israel” (Gen. 33:20). This was the exact same place where Israel was now renewing their covenant with God.

#### VERSE 24

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**So the people said to Joshua, “We will worship the LORD our God and obey him.”**

Once again, **the people** reaffirmed their promise to worship and obey **“the LORD our God.”** The expression *the people* is often a substitute for the name *Israel*. This expression is first used to describe how God’s people multiplied in Egypt after Joseph (Ex. 1:20). Moses demanded that Pharaoh “let my people go” (5:1). In fact, this expression is used scores of times in the book of Exodus. God’s relationship is not with some political entity, but with a group that is His own. In Joshua, the expression goes

back to Joshua 1:2: “You and all the people prepare to cross over the Jordan.” That is exactly what they did. The people crossed the Jordan, possessed and distributed the land among their tribes, and here stood at Shechem to recommit themselves to obeying the law of Moses.

Joshua finalized this covenant by doing a few things (24:25-28). He recorded the covenant in the book of the law of God. He set up a stone monument as a lasting memorial. This act reveals two witnesses: a stone and the people. In a court of law, there are witnesses for and witnesses against the defendant. Joshua set the stone as a “witness against us.” This stone would support the prosecution’s case against Israel, if and when they reneged on their covenant commitments.

In this final chapter of the book he set that stone “under the oak at the sanctuary of the LORD.” In this region of the ancient Near East, water was often scarce. Oak groves grew in places where there were springs or rivers. A spring in the middle of a dry region was a sign of life, and often given sacred significance. An angel of the Lord appeared to Gideon under an oak tree in Ophrah (Judg. 6:11). Deborah, a woman who had nursed and raised Rebekah, was buried under an oak (Gen. 35:8).

The book of Joshua does not end with this covenant ceremony. It ends with the deaths of Joshua (Josh. 24:29-31) and Eleazar (v. 33). It was the end of an era. Like the end of Deuteronomy which recounts Moses’s death (Deut. 34:5-8), these two early leaders of Israel went the way of every human being. This left a huge vacuum in leadership, a vulnerability which led to the Israelites’ falling away from God and into idolatry as told in the book of Judges.



### **Explore Further**

Read the article “Idolatry: Its Persistent Appeal” on pages 312–313 in the *Holy Land Illustrated Bible* and “Idol” on page 788 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What did idols supposedly have to offer that made them so appealing to the peoples of the ancient world? Are there any idols which tempt you? If so, what can you do to resist the temptation of those idols and remain faithful to the Lord?

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1. David M. Howard, *Joshua*, vol. 5, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1998), 438.