

Sermon – Undivided heart required Joshua 24:1-28

Neighbours of mine decided that a tableau **pair of skeletons** on the roof seated and playing a game of cards was the **most appropriate monument** to the end the world's longest Covid-19 lockdown.

As we shall see in our last study of the Book of Joshua, in chapter 24, Joshua chose a **different kind of monument** to mark a different kind of special occasion.

A **huge stone¹ monument** was erected and stood for generations.



It was placed at **Shechem**, a **sacred location** for many reasons. It was dear to Israel. It was located west of the Jordan, between Mt. Gerizim (on the left) and Mt. Ebal (on the right) where the promise was originally given to Abraham long ago, and the covenant with God was renewed just back in chapter 8. Here God



promised Abraham an inheritance to outnumber the stars in the sky and sand on the shore (Gen. 12:6). The first altar of worship to the LORD was established here (Gen. 12:7). Jacob returned to Shechem to settle his family here (Gen. 33). And here, Joseph son of Jacob insisted his bones must be taken from Egypt and one day buried here when God's promise to settle Israel here was realized (Gen 50:24,25; Josh. 24:32).



The stone monument in this sacred location would stand to be an enduring, immovable, unmissable physical **marker** to remind generations of what took place on this day.

In **verses 25-26** we read...

¹ remember when 12 stones were erected at Gilgal in chapter 4, on the West bank of the Jordan?

“On that day Joshua made a covenant for the people, and there at Shechem² he reaffirmed for them decrees and laws. And Joshua recorded these things in the Book of the Law of God. Then he **took a large stone** and set it up there under the oak near the holy place of the LORD.”

The **long journey** for ancient Israel from the **promise** given to Abraham to **settlement in peace** in the land of Canaan was now **complete**.³

Joshua recited a potted history of the promise in **verses 3-13**, to the whole assembly Israel. He said to them:

³ ...I took your father Abraham from the land beyond the Euphrates and led him throughout Canaan and gave him many descendants. I gave him Isaac, ⁴ and to Isaac I gave Jacob and Esau. I assigned the hill country of Seir to Esau, but Jacob and his family went down to Egypt. ⁵ “Then I sent Moses and Aaron, and I afflicted the Egyptians by what I did there, and I brought you out. ⁶ When I brought your people out of Egypt, you came to the sea, and the Egyptians pursued them with chariots and horsemen as far as the Red Sea. ⁷ 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 wilderness for a long time. ⁸ “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. ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ But I would not listen to Balaam, so he blessed you again and again, and I delivered you out of his hand. ¹¹ “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. ¹² 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. ¹³ 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.”

² Shechem (Sichem), said as “Sheechem”, was a Canaanite city mentioned in the Amarna letters, and is the first capital of the Kingdom of Israel. Joshua 21:20–21 locates it in the tribal territory of Ephraim north of Bethel and Shiloh, on the high road going from Jerusalem to the northern districts (Judges 21:19)

³ See Josh 21:43-45

Joshua cites no less than **28 acts**⁴ of saving grace by the LORD. All that was left after such a speech was to urge the people to take up their part of the covenant agreement with the LORD; to formalize the covenant.⁵

This chapter begs the **reader to ask**: “**Will Israel commit to the LORD** and live in accordance with what they agreed to? Will they live as fit representatives of the LORD in the land?”

Joshua says to them in verses 14-15:

‘Now **fear** the LORD and **serve** [the LORD] with all faithfulness. **Throw away** the gods your ancestors worshipped... **choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve**, whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates, 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 issued a challenge – **choose the LORD**. And he put his own foot forward, “As for me and my household, we will serve the LORD. What about the rest of them? Would they commit?”

I guess many of you have had a question like, “what about you, do you believe in God?” “Are you a Christian?” “What does that look like in practice?” I wonder if the binding nature of Joshua’s call to ancient Israel seems a bit too binding, a too much to you compared to what you think a Christian is bound to?

You and I make binding commitments often, actually. We press “**accept**” or tick a box online regularly when using our computers or smartphones, or when signing a contractual agreement. There are always terms and conditions that come with **enjoying the benefits** of a service or product that makes our lives better. Many of us don’t even read the fine print and can be blithely ignorant of expectations on us.⁶



⁴ 21 explicit, 4 indirect, 3 implied

⁵ Ch 24 shows many similarities to practices of binding agreements among other peoples in the ancient world

⁶ E.g. a phone contract, a financial loan, a new piece of software, an amazon delivery, etc.

Ancient Israel was **not ignorant** of the **expectations** upon them in the covenant that **made their lives very much better** indeed. In a location not far from Shechem, recorded back in Joshua chapter 8, the **whole Law of Moses** had been read to Israel's tribes to make clear the benefits, risks, and expectations of choosing to be the people of the LORD⁷.

In **verses 14-15** Joshua's urging of Israel to take up their part in the covenant now they are settled in the land reads like an abbreviated form of the **T&C's** agreed to by Israel. He says:

¹⁴ 'Now fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your ancestors worshipped beyond the River Euphrates and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. ¹⁵ But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.'

Note the three-fold response expected of Israel:

1. **Fear** (which means to be in **awe** of God) the LORD, a logical response to all that they have witnessed of God's greatness,
2. **Serve** the LORD (the Hebrew word *abad* is here 14 times in chapter 24)⁸, a consistent biblical theme that faith is proved genuine by actions that reflect Gods' character in terms of selflessness, love, justice, mercy, etc., and
3. thirdly, "**throw away**" the idols and practices of other religions and **yield to the LORD** with an **undivided** heart. We should note the two options of "gods" of the Canaanites or those Abraham's family would have worshipped were utterly incompatible with life the LORD called them to live.⁹

Note first that Joshua, like a good leader should, testifies to his own assent to the responses God desires, saying, "As for me... and for mine... we choose the LORD."

⁷ At the renewal of God's covenant on the mountain nearby Shechem in Joshua 8, the whole of the Law of Moses was read aloud to them.

⁸ 21 times in the last 4 chapters

⁹ Such religions of the time fostered division, inequity, injustice, and disorder, serving the needs of the elite

In **verses 16-18**, it appears at first glance that Israel's tribes did accept all three T's&C's. They say, as if in unison:

¹⁶ Then the people answered, 'Far be it from us to forsake the LORD to serve other gods! ¹⁷ It was the LORD our God himself who brought us and our parents 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 travelled. 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.'

But it seems from **verses 19 to 24** that Joshua identifies the semantics of their response. They take up points 1 & 2 of the T's&C's, but they cleverly and deliberately **obfuscate** the call to **"throw away" the gods** and their values and practices that they have clung to along the journey. Joshua interrogates the gathering saying:

¹⁹ Joshua said to the people, '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. ²⁰ 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.' ²¹ But the people said to Joshua, 'No! We will serve the LORD.' ²² Then Joshua said, 'You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen to serve the LORD.' 'Yes, we are witnesses,' they replied. ²³ 'Now then,' said Joshua, 'throw away the foreign gods that are among you and yield your hearts to the LORD, the God of Israel.' ²⁴ And the people said to Joshua, 'We will serve the LORD our God and obey him.'

Joshua even tells them in **vs. 19**, because **God is holy** and because their hearts are not given in undivided loyalty to God, **they cannot do what they say**. Such glib lip service to the covenant will not cut it. Hedging their bets and holding on to alternative deities that are no match for the LORD's greatness or goodness is a fault with grave consequences.

In **verse 24** Joshua declares the defendant as "guilty". After documenting all of this (verses 25-26) in Holy Scripture, Joshua lands a verdict that turns the fortunes of Israel, now living in prosperity and peace, on its head. He says:

²⁷ 'See!' he said to all the people. 'This stone will be a witness against us. It has heard all the words the LORD has said to us. It will be a witness against you if you are untrue to your God.' ²⁸ Then Joshua dismissed the people, each to their own inheritance.

“Blessings” and “curses” were a familiar feature of ancient covenant ceremonies like this one. Though not mentioned specifically here, the curses associated with knowingly breaching the covenant T’s&C’s were clarified in the prior full reading of the covenant at Mt. Ebal (chapter 8).¹⁰

The *Book of Judges* that follows *Joshua*, for example, plays out like theatre illustrating the resultant disasters following on from a fraudulent commitment to the covenant at Shechem.

The LORD proved to be **uniquely divine, supremely powerful, and full of goodness and mercy**. Yet, divided hearts, tempted to hold on to self-serving and often unjust alternative religious systems became Israel’s Achilles Heel.¹¹

The **great stone** monument, intended to “document” the fulfilment of promise and peace, now stood as a **witness against ancient Israel**. It “heard” the Words of the LORD, and also the response of the people that day.

We learn again and again in the Old Testament of the frailty and easily tempted nature of the human heart. Sadly, Israel did not fully satisfy their part in the covenant the LORD made with them. Even more disturbing, Israel of the Old Testament never fully satisfied their side of the deal in further renewals of the covenant with the LORD.

It’s no wonder then, that the **New Testament** (New Covenant) is proclaimed as good news to the world. **God came to us**¹² in the humanity of Jesus to offer a new agreement. God, in Christ, one who proved to be loyal in heart to his Heavenly Father, came to *be* our **perfect representative**. Jesus is the one that Israel, and we ourselves, **never were!** Jesus is, according to Hebrews 12:2 the **pioneer and perfecter** of *our* faith.

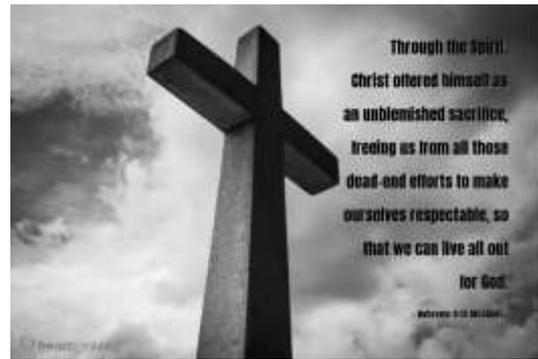


¹⁰ E.g. Deut. 28

¹¹ Please forgive the mixed anatomical metaphor 😊

¹² E.g. John 1:1

Jesus is also called the **mediator of a new covenant**. It's as if he pressed the "accept" button, knowingly fulfilling on our behalf all the terms and conditions necessary for sinners like us to be united with God who is holy (Hebrews 9:15 and 1 Timothy 2:5).



Now, because of Jesus, and with the help of God's Spirit, **we can be "all in"** for God because so long as we are one with Christ by faith (Hebrews 9:15).

For Christians, the **marker** or **monument** that best marks with significance our relationship with the LORD is the cross of Christ. It is the enduring **witness to what God has done** for us. The cross too reminds us of our shortcomings, but because of the one who took our place upon it, it points to our inheritance in all God's promised blessings that Jesus came to offer us.



Joshua 24 raises a question for us today. After all the LORD has done for **us** in Christ – **"Will we commit** to the LORD and worship and serve God with undivided hearts, living in accordance with the holy lives to which we are called?"

The Apostle Paul, in his **Letter to the Romans**, somewhat like Joshua, sets out his case for the LORD's divine and gracious goodness and love in Christ in the first 11 chapters of that epistle. Like Joshua, Paul is all in for the LORD and testifies to it often.¹³ He also urges God's people to do the same, to respond "all in" to the new covenant God offers to the world in Jesus Christ. In Romans 12 he writes:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual [or **reasonable**] worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by

¹³ Rom. 8:18, Phil. 3:7-8

the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.” (Romans 12:1-2)

Because of **all we know of God in Christ**, because of all **Jesus has done for us**, Paul urges us to be all in with the LORD – that’s our reasonable, or rational worship.

While we bear similar frailties of heart to those ancient Israelites in Joshua’s time, God sent Jesus on our behalf, as our “representatives”. God has offered Christ in our place and looks upon his undivided heart and asks us to be united to him by faith, and so become co-heirs of all God promises made through Christ.

Yet, the urging of Joshua to old Israel to live in accordance with God’s desires remains, albeit with the promise that God’s Spirit will enable us and help us. Paul’s long list of desires as to how Christians might live in the light of Christ in Romans 12:3-21 have an affinity with the purpose of the T’s&C’s in the old covenant. Paul urges us, saying:

⁹ Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. ¹⁰ Be devoted to one another in love. Honour one another above yourselves. ¹¹ Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervour, serving the Lord. ¹² Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. ¹³ Share with the Lord’s people who are in need. Practise hospitality. ¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. ¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. ¹⁶ Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited. ¹⁷ Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. ¹⁸ If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. ¹⁹ Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ says the Lord. ²⁰ On the contrary: ‘If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.’ ²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Notice how Paul’s vision of Christian living, in response to faith in Christ and the power of God’s Spirit reads like a roadmap for taking up our part of the deal. Our response should be characterized by acts of service that express love,

mercy and justice bearing witness to Jesus' undivided heart and faith revealed in the Gospels.¹⁴

That **stone monument** of old still reminds us we **can't do it** without the LORD's saving grace. The new covenant in Christ graciously frees us from the grave consequences Israel of old experienced under the curses of the old covenant. Christ took those upon himself, for our sake.¹⁵ The **cross of Christ**, on the other hand, is the important marker for us. It symbolises the moment of change for us and for the world when the new covenant of God was fulfilled for us and offered freely to us in Christ. Now it remains for us to willingly yield our hearts with devotion and service to such a great and gracious God.

Steve Webster St Michaels North Carlton 2021

¹⁴ Note in Romans 12:3-21 what the commitment he calls for looks like in the real world

¹⁵ Galatians 3:13