

Joshua 24:14-33

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[0:00] And we're going to open the word together in a moment. I'll be in Joshua chapter 24. So if you've got a Bible with you, it will help you to turn there. It's right at the end of the book. We have reached the end of our series, Preaching Through Joshua.

Today is the last one of those messages. I've had a lot of fun. I mean, I hope that you have too. I think the Lord's had a lot to say to us through this at times strange and ancient book.

What we're going to do next is kind of next week, and then for the six weeks over the summer, we're going to preach through the major events of the life of Elijah. Not literally everything, but picking up on the main stories.

The kids are going to be in with us. I don't know if those of you who are around might remember Easter, where the kids had kind of worksheets to do to help them follow along with a message.

We're going to do that. There might be a few things to help them join in with worship as well.

And mostly that will be new speakers. I mean, you've got me next week, but mostly that will be new speakers or newer speakers kind of having a go, but exploring these again. Strange stories that actually have a lot to say to us.

[1:00] Then in September, we'll be preaching through the Gospel of Matthew, but we'll say more about that when we get there. My question for us this morning, this last message in Joshua, is who are you going to serve?

It's the question that Joshua asked the people in the passage I'm about to read. Who are you going to serve? And I suspect most of us, not out loud because we're not this honest, but want to say ourselves. But that isn't one of the options that is available to us.

Let me read you the passage. I'm going to start at verse 14. So in one sense, we're diving into the middle of the story because we start with now therefore, but we'll tell that bit in a minute. Now therefore, fear the Lord and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness.

Put away the gods that your fathers served beyond the river and in Egypt and serve the Lord. And if it is evil in your eyes to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the river or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell.

But as for me and my house, this is Joshua, as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord. Then the people answered, Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods.

[2:26] For it is the Lord our God who brought us and our fathers up from the land of Egypt out of the house of slavery and who did those great signs in our sight and preserved us in all the way that we went and among all the peoples through whom we passed.

And the Lord drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land. Therefore, we also will serve the Lord. He is our God. But Joshua said to the people, You are not able to serve the Lord, for he is our holy God.

It's all going so well. He is a jealous God. He will not forgive your transgressions or your sins. If you forsake the Lord and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm and consume you after having done you good.

And the people said to Joshua, No, but we will serve the Lord. Then Joshua said to the people, You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen the Lord to serve him.

And they said, We are witnesses. He said, Then put away the foreign gods that are among you and incline your heart to the Lord, the God of Israel.

[3:44] And the people said to Joshua, The Lord our God we will serve, and his voice we will obey. So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day and put in place statutes and rules for them at Shechem.

And Joshua wrote these words in the book of the law of God. And he took a large stone and set it up there under the terebinth that was by the sanctuary of the Lord. And Joshua said to all the people, Behold, this stone shall be a witness against us, for it has heard all the words of the Lord that he spoke to us.

Therefore it shall be a witness against you, lest you deal falsely with your God. So Joshua sent the people away, every man to his inheritance. After these things, Joshua, the son of Nun, the servant of the Lord, died, being 110 years old, and they buried him in his own inheritance at Timnath-Serah, which is in the hill country of Ephraim, north of the mountains of Gash.

Israel served the Lord all the days of Joshua and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua and had known all the work that the Lord did for Israel.

As for the bones of Joseph, which the people of Israel brought up from Egypt, they buried them at Shechem in the piece of land that Jacob bought from the sons of Hamel, the father of Shechem, for a hundred pieces of money.

[5:04] It became an inheritance of the descendants of Joseph. And Eliezer, the son of Aaron, died, and they buried him at Gibeah, the town of Phinehas, his son, which had been given him in the hill country of Ephraim.

This is the word of the Lord. And I appreciate it. It seems strange that we have a story and then a list of where people died and where they were buried. I'm not particularly going to preach on that last bit, but it is very important to the people of Israel, due to a number of things that have already happened in the story, where people get buried.

And in fact, particularly, they took Joseph's bones from Egypt and then buried them at the place where the sanctuary is set up, where the tabernacle is, which is also the very first place that Abraham spoke with God in the land that he was to give him.

So for them, this is like a full circle thing. It's like we went into exile and now we're back. That's why they're concerned by that. But what's going on? The land has been conquered to some extent.

The covenant has been renewed between them. We haven't read the last kind of chapter and a half on a Sunday, but what's happened is they've renewed the covenant that God had once given them previously in the wilderness.

[6:10] They've renewed it again. And God has brought them out of Egypt and they've reminded themselves of all of this. And then Joshua says, now therefore, so because of all of that, because we've renewed a covenant, because we've reminded ourselves of all the things that God has done on our behalf, therefore, fear the Lord.

It's probably not the words we would expect to put next. Therefore, fear the Lord. We can fall into this trap of thinking that God is really nice. God is not nice.

God is good. God is not nice. Not so long back in the Bible story before these events we're reading, Jacob swore a covenant with a man called Laban and he wanted to swear it by the name of God. And so he swore by the name Isaac's fear. That's who God is. There's many other things as well, but that's who God is.

Isaac's fear. If you know Isaac's story, you might get some sense of why that is. What do we mean by fear? We mean not necessarily, oh my word, I must run away and hide, but awe.

[7:26] Reverence. We should fear God, which means we should be in awe of him and approach him as though he's the one who made the world because he is. And at the same time, lots of us want to rush to the idea that we know that God is for us because in Jesus, the New Testament is very clear to tell us that if you trust Jesus, you are a child of God and he treats you as though he was your father.

And even that warning in the passage I read, it's like, if you don't serve me, I will consume you, it says in verse 20.

Well, the father has consumed the son on our behalf. That's what happened on the cross. So that we know that even if we do not serve God well, that punishment, if we trust in Jesus, will not fall on us.

All of that is true. And I think sometimes it can cause us to crowd out the idea that God is awe-inspiring and worthy of our fear, as the Bible puts it.

It's like we can become overly familiar with him if you know him, if you follow him. There are two things I think that can look like, becoming overly familiar with God. One of them, this passage is all about will you serve me or not?

[8:41] And yet I think sometimes we treat God like he's our servant. Have you ever experienced that in your own heart? As though God was the waiter at the table. And you're sort of, you know, you're having your meal and the waiter's come over and he's like taking your order and you're like, I'd like this and I'd like this and I'd like this and maybe you're a bit snooty and he starts ordering some stuff that's not on the menu and expect him to provide it for you anyway.

And maybe it's the kind of place that they do that. And so he kind of brings the things that aren't on the menu. And then how you're not quite impressed with you. You know, you're feeling quite proud and you know that you know what good food tastes like and this is not really the food you were expecting and you're like, Gasson!

Because you're being fancy and you think speaking in French somehow makes you look fancy. You're going to call the waiter over very rudely and you start to say, this is not, this is not what I was expecting.

Can you bring me something better please? Like it's not being cooked properly and you give all your advice to the chef and you send it. I imagine no one in the room has had this experience because it's not very English if we're honest. But you might have seen people on television programs acting like this.

But you're just, you know, kind of having this back and forth with the waiter where you're just not very impressed with what they've done. You keep giving these demands and then at the end you, maybe you leave a tip but a small one because you weren't that impressed.

[10:00] I think we treat God like that. As though you get to say, well I want this and I want this and I want this and I'm not that impressed with what you've just given me. It's like you wouldn't dare to do it in a waiter or some of us might but most of us in the room probably are British or have been slightly inculcated into British culture and so you're like, that's very rude.

We wouldn't do that. But we do it with God all the time. You're like, you ask for the off book thing and then when he gives you something you're like, that is not any good.

That is not what I wanted. And you criticise heavily and then you tip based on the service. It's as though doing his job means doing what you say because that's I think sometimes how we treat waiting staff.

They did a good job means they did what you asked them to do. Is God doing a good job if he does what you say? No.

And the question that Joshua asked the people at the end of this book, will you serve the Lord? I think we so often get backwards in our heads because we feel like, no, no, God's there to serve me.

[11:12] You wouldn't say it out loud because you know it's not the right answer but yet your heart does this thing where you're like, but I want this and I want this and I want this and you know what? For many of us, the things that you want are good godly things.

Not unreasonable to ask for. But we can get ourselves caught in this trap that's happened to my house so many times where you're like, but I'm cross because he hasn't given me what I wanted. He never said he would. We serve God. That's how the Bible describes it.

It says, well, you said you've got choice actually about who you serve but you've got to serve someone. If you choose to serve God, we serve God. He doesn't serve us.

It's an honor to wait at his table in essence. We're supposed to be the waiters. Now, if we were, he'd be the kindest customer there's ever been who's like, why don't you grab a seat and I'll buy you a meal.

[12:11] That's the kind of customer, as it were, that the Lord is if we're the waiter. But still, we serve him. And we're going to come to his table a little bit later on.

We're going to have communion towards the end of our time together this morning and we'll discover in wonder actually that sort of he does serve us at table. but he calls us to serve him.

The Bible continually calls us his slaves which we find deeply offensive. But use that language of us. It says you can be a slave to sin or a slave to righteousness. Those are your choices.

Now, Jesus makes that in some ways more complicated because he sits his disciples down and he says, I could call you slaves but I'm going to choose to call you friends. And he changes the whole relationship.

But his point isn't that they're not, that rightfully we're not there to serve him. It's, no, no, I choose to change the relationship. And he calls us friends. God isn't here to serve you and he isn't here to get on your mission.

[13:13] He is calling us to serve him and for us to get on his. Again, if you're a Christian and you've been to church, you know that. But I just think our hearts can get it backwards so easily.

Certainly not trying to tell you off. I think I'm in much the same boat but we just, we can get it all confused where we forget that we're here to serve God.

We forget that we're here for his mission. We have some sense of what, we wouldn't put it in these terms but what our mission is and we're like, can God come and help, can you help me with my life? He might.

He's very kind. But that's not the point. He says, come on my mission. I'm here to change the whole world through my church.

You can join in. So that's one of the ways I think that we can almost become overly familiar with God. The other is what I call playing at church.

[14:10] Again, I think we all do this. I know I find it in my own heart sometimes but the church is his bride. It's how the Bible describes her. She is his mission. God's mission to the world is to make his church go everywhere.

He loves her deeply. She's the hope of the world and yet we can get this kind of consumerist thing in our hearts where we feel like church is meant to be comfortable, meant to fit our preferences.

That's not it at all. Can I find this in myself? But where we think church should look like this instead what Jesus calls us to is he says no, no, I have a mission to do in the world to make disciples until he tells us until the glory of the Lord covers the earth like the waters cover the sea.

We aren't there yet so let's get on the mission. Church is serious business. We're here for encounters with the living God.

I wonder if that's how you think about it. I wonder if you think and again I'm not about to tell you a way that my heart responds but I think it should. I wonder if on a Sunday morning when you're getting up you think yes encounters with the living God time I'm going to go and meet his people I'm going to see Jesus in their faces we are going to praise him I'm going to bring my contribution hey we're even going to eat him today woohoo I wonder if your heart does that.

[15:46] You know what I bet there's someone in the room who's like yeah actually honestly that is kind of how I felt this morning great well done. Would that it would be all of us every week. Honestly it's not is it?

It's not and sometimes it's a duty and there's nothing wrong with making discipline out of things that are good for you sure there's nothing wrong with that week when you're like I'm not feeling it but I'm going to go anyway that is a really good attitude because there's much better than the alternative but what we should be looking for in our own hearts is this sense of I want to be with God and the way to be with God is to be with his people and that is joyful and kind of serious and so I'm going to get myself to the church.

Now yeah you made it this morning so in one sense preaching to the choir however you felt as you got up and made your way here. but we're here to encounter the living God and to serve him.

That's the option he gives us will you serve me? And we do really want to prioritize worshipping God on a Sunday I'm about to just give you a slip a little notice into the message and then we'll get back to Joshua so forgive me and some of you will have heard this before because we talked about this at our whole church meeting a couple of months back but we're making some changes to our Sundays from September deliberately to try and help us worship God.

So to spin back several years on the return from COVID this church was only an hour to try and ease people in on a Sunday good decision and then extend it over time to an hour and 15 sure and then we've stopped more recently we've stopped streaming stopped kind of recording the whole meeting again sort of reversing some of those things in COVID to help people again re-engage that were helpful at the time not so helpful now and the elders have been discussing actually for a long long time for several years longer than I've been here when is the right time to return to kind of a full length Sunday meeting and essentially the right times now we've been particularly thinking about when is kids work ready for that and they are now ready haven't always been but they are now ready for that strong enough for us to do that so from September we'll be returning the meeting to a 12 p.m.

[18:02] finish as it used to be some time ago sort of full length hour and a half come and worship God and you might think well you might either think 15 minutes who cares or you might think but why if you think 15 minutes who cares okay but if you think but why have you noticed how squeezed our Sundays can be we've had a few recently where either we've over ironed slightly or

you're just like it's kind of hard to get contributions in it's kind of hard to wait on God you feel a little bit like you're rushing from one thing to the next it's not really what we want because we're trying to prioritize encounters with the living God in our worship in the preached words that's what's supposed to be happening when we preach is that you encounter Jesus in the pages as we take communion again we encounter Jesus as we eat something but our primary aim with the extra time is to allow more time for worship and to encourage contributions in fact it has lots of other benefits most weeks someone on the kids work team says I wish I had a bit longer to kind of to teach what they're hoping to do with the children so again benefits there too but in essence the children are going to go out at the same time they'll have a slightly longer session and we up here will have an ever so slightly longer

Sunday in order to prioritize worshipping God we're not trying to add any extra things into the Sunday we just want to let it breathe a little bit so that'll be starting from September so we're going to do six weeks with the kids in that may actually end up being a touch shorter we're going to play it by ear slightly but then in September they might not we'll see the spirit descends there's no clock because the children aren't there I don't need to come up at a particular time but I wonder if they might end up being a little bit shorter but then in September we'll be looking at finishing at 12 p.m. every week now this is not news to many of you and lots of the various serving teams have been working hard on how exactly is this going to work and figuring out the details that they need to but we're doing that because we want to serve the Lord because we believe that church is about encounters with God because church is serious business and we're here to serve God not anything else to come back to the passage that I read Joshua tells them you have we're going to serve the Lord me and my house what you're going to do and they say yes we are and then he responds quite negatively to them and it seems as it emerges that essentially they've gone sure without giving up any of the other things that they serve because he then asks them again will you give up the various the foreign gods that you would used to worship and then they make a covenant so I think the implication is a kind of they're like yes and he's like you haven't really understood what I meant because you need to get rid of all this other worship in your life in order to serve God he is an exclusive God he's a jealous God worship him alone and then they go oh okay you're remembering that by this time lots of people in the land have come to kind of join in the people of Israel probably bringing their gods with them and perhaps slightly confused by this and he's like no this is the kind of people that we are we follow the Lord alone not anything else you must destroy the false gods that's true for us too and

I suspect we think oh no no we don't do that the thing is our hearts as John Calvin the French church planter famously said our hearts are factories for idols just make them again and again and again something else to worship must destroy the false gods and yes sure we meet false religions we do not believe that they are true in fact they are harmful yes but also lots of other things that we wouldn't think of as gods can cling into our hearts money sex and power being the most obvious three sure have they got a hook in you in which case you need to cast that aside but also yes witchcraft which again you might think oh that's not a thing that I'm particularly struggling with but you walk down the high street in Alton and you'll see plenty of opportunities to get involved in some kind of witchcraft it's pretty pretty common it's quite good business it makes quite a lot of money these days in the UK super dangerous for you clearly a false god encountering dangerous spiritual beings but also the one that we are probably most most now that some of those things might be some of you but the one that

I suspect most of us are tempted to serve instead would be something like consumerism or materialism and by that I mean me and my stuff and getting what I want which actually isn't about serving you you end up kind of attached to something else to serve it but it'll kill you in fact anything you serve that isn't the living god will kill you and not just in a kind of oh what happens to me when I die sort of well trust Jesus and you'll be fine but no it'll kill you now it'll mess up your life you will not flourish which is the path that the Lord has for you he wants you to flourish right now as well as be raised into glory in the age to come and I don't want to make this too one-to-one because I'm about to make an application about serving in the church and what I do not want us to hear is the only way to give up your false gods is if you do what

Tim just said no and I also don't want you to hear if you don't serve in the church the way Tim just described you will die no might make for my rota's easier if that were true but it's not but it's not true so don't hear that but we do have to are we single-minded do we want to serve God and nothing

else it's a question we've got to ask ourselves the likelihood is that you want to go yes and every single one of us who is a Christian and following Jesus can find in our heart a place where the answer is no this is what when I said earlier that quote the heart is a factory of idols we do this funny thing where you're like I serve God wholeheartedly and that might largely be true and there'll be this little bit where you're like and also this thing and you have to go on it and then probably your heart will go oh this thing because our hearts are like that and so this isn't a sort of yes I'm fine probably none of us are fine me included like what do we need to crush next what false God do we need to give up next what is the thing that we're following that we shouldn't be the Lord is kind if our heart is like a conveyor belt of idols he'll show us one at a time and say that we're next there's no great pressure the question is what is the next thing that the Lord is calling you to say oh no [25:05] I shouldn't be serving that I need to serve God alone and that is a question to ask him is when we in a moment or two return to worship and take the supper what's the next thing in your heart where God is saying actually no serve me alone but one of the ways that you can help your heart serve God is to serve in the church as the application said was warming up to but it is to serve in the church church is a team sport not a spectator sport it's something that we all join in on it's something that we all serve we all of the money that makes this stuff happen comes out of your wallets and mine we serve we give we join in together it's a team sport and we are a church who's got a reasonably wide fringe and we do ask that everybody who is part of us serves on a Sunday and there'll be a very small number of people who physically can't but the vast majority of people can let me give you an example it takes around about at the moment 35 people to make a Sunday happen ideally it would take 40 it's kind of stretched and ideally people would serve one in four so that's 160 people that's fine we've got more of that and we have more adults than that so it should be nice and easy

I just looked on Church Street our little database system over the last three months how many people have served because it tells you that 93 it's actually not a lot more than half what that means is that those people are serving way more than I just said because there are still 35 people making a Sunday happen each week so those 93 people are serving incredibly diligently some of them are more than one team which we need them to but we really wish we didn't need them to and more frequently than we would like and lots of other people are not so those 93 people gosh I'm so sorry that we're working you so hard thank you deeply appreciated but really not where we should be but well done but also we kind of need to help you not do as much and the other kind of 70 whatever it would be people where are you so we again you need to ask yourselves if you are part of us and there are some places you can say if you're not a member if you're like

I'm just I'm just kind of on my way into membership okay we think that's important but that's okay there are some places you can serve that we don't need to be a member there are a couple you do but could you could you serve I think the answer is probably yes for most people there will be one or two where it's difficult there'll be something that most people can do the two areas that need particular help are Lighthouse who've left with our adults with additional needs they really need help and our welcome teams but every team could do with more people because everything is a little bit tight and I just think about it like this serving in the church is not the it's not the only way to do this it's not even maybe the major way to do this but it's a really helpful way of saying to your heart no I am going to serve God not my own comfort not my own whatever it might be I am going to serve God and if you're not serving and you're part of us

I'd say well take this away pray with the expectation that the Lord will convict you and then come and tell us where you'd like to join in but more importantly in some ways than that application just ask the question who are you serving just in your life generally whether you take me up on what I just said or not who are you serving don't mess around with Jesus right at the end Joshua writes on a stone which is odd to us and he puts it in this place in Shechem next to an oak tree at Terebinth that is the same tree that God first met Abraham under in the land and he built an altar there so he puts the stone in the same place that Abraham built his first altar and he writes on it and he says this is going to help us remember that we said we're going to serve the Lord we find the end of the book because it says they did in all of Joshua's life and they did in the life of all the leaders of Israel who were alive at that time the implication as you get into the next book of the Bible is it didn't continue now we're not going to do that story today but it didn't last it lasted for a generation it's wonderful it didn't continue he wrote it on a stone that's important to us for one reason the word stone even or ebon in Hebrew sounds like another word in Hebrew enough that the Bible often

makes a pun with it sounds like the word ben which means son every time you see stone you should think is there a son because the Old Testament does this a lot kind of makes this pun he writes it on a stone and it says the stone has heard you you think stones don't have ears which should make us go does he mean something else and I think we should read it to say the son has heard you when he said

I will serve the Lord Jesus has heard them and he'll hold them to their words and he will crush those who don't stand on him you've got a choice essentially it's like well let the stone crush you or use the stone as a foundation for your life follow Jesus join with Joshua and say as for me and my house we will serve the Lord and then you'll find that he is a kind master I've said enough I think can we have the band please but as in a moment we're going to sing and we're going to come to his table but which is it's always a strange counterpoint because we're like serve serve serve serve and then we're going to come to a table where what we discover is that God is gracious and kind and for us and says have this have this have this oh it's free oh you get it if you served or not all you've got to do is trust and that's the way around it works we serve because we first find that God is kind and gracious and for us and then we go oh and our hearts change and we go

[31:30] I could do that and if you're like I don't know about all of this then what you need to do is you need to meet Jesus even if you've met him before and find him to be gracious and kind and for you which is what we find at his table when he offers us bread and a cup and says it's my body and my blood for your food and I'll see you next time and I'll see you next time