

## **Inclining Your Heart – Joshua 24:16-33**

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### **I. INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT**

Well, the day has arrived. After 27 sermons and the passing of 1 year and 2 weeks, we've arrived today at the end of the book of Joshua with the final 18 verses and sermon #28! During the last year of this study of Joshua, we've seen our great God in powerful action fighting for his people over and over again as they cried out to him, courageously followed his lead and stayed in rhythm with him...what we called in a recent sermon *the rhythm of life with God*. If you'll remember this rhythm had 5 sequential and yet continuous elements that were founded on experiencing the personal love of God and beginning to love him back, and resulted in a lifestyle of full, surrendered, effective service to God.

This 5-fold rhythm of life with God that was outlined for us in Joshua 22, verses 1 to 6, was this:

- 1) Loving the LORD our God;
- 2) Walking in ALL his ways;
- 3) Keeping his word;
- 4) Clinging to him OR holding fast to him;
- 5) Serving him with ALL our heart and with ALL our soul.

As God's people experience his personal love for them and understand his good intentions toward them, they begin to love him back and desire him deeply. They begin walking around with him...spending time with him and listening to him through his Word and prayer. They start believing what he says is true and start putting it into practice in their lives. They cling to him and seek his power and wisdom and strength at all times, knowing that apart from him they can do nothing. And as they do this God fills them up with all they need...he makes all grace abound to them, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, they may abound in every good work...serving him effectively and powerfully accomplishing his will. This is the rhythm of life with God that we encountered in Joshua and that is consistently presented throughout all of Scripture.

But there are several places where God's people commonly get out of rhythm with him and end up short-circuiting this process. We saw all of them take place at different times in Joshua. The first is the temptation to stop with number one. I just want to soak up the love of God and his generosity and gifts and keep them all to myself. He loves me, I'm forgiven and I just want to celebrate that and never get about the business of loving him back and allowing him to fully have his way in my life. We don't allow God's love to have its intended effect of moving us to love him back by walking with him, believing what he says, and really beginning to put into practice by his power.

A second place where we get off track is when we fall for the tempting God-substitutes the enemy is constantly dangling out in front of us. Achan is a good example of this one. He saw some bright, shiny, valuable things that God had said no to, he wanted them more than he wanted God, and he took them for himself. And the effect on his relationship with God was devastating. When we love other things more than God, we inevitably end up hindering our relationship with God, disobeying his Word and harming ourselves in the process.

And a third place where we get off track from God's rhythm is when we jump to number 5 and seek to serve God in our own strength. We forget that apart from God we can do nothing. And we end up like Joshua and the Israelites at the city of Ai, rushing into battle without consulting with God, but instead, trusting in our own strength and wisdom...always a recipe for complete and utter failure. If we're going to walk into the purpose God has for us and experience the fullness of him fighting on our behalf and equipping us for every good work as his servants, we've got to cling to him and seek him and call on him at all times.

Well, we're going to see some of these same principles reaffirmed and re-stated as we wrap up the book of Joshua today. If you'll remember from last week, I kind of left you hanging. Joshua had just issued a challenge to the whole nation of Israel and it was this: *Choose this day whom you will serve*. Joshua and his household had already made their choice, now it was time to see what the rest of the nation would choose. If haven't already done so, turn in your Bibles to Joshua, chapter 24, where we'll begin with verses 16 through 18, which I've labeled in your sermon notes: *Choosing to Serve*.

## II. CHOOSING TO SERVE (Vs. 16 to 18)

Let's begin by reading verses 16 through 18:

***16 Then the people answered, "Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods, 17 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. 18 And the Lord drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land. Therefore we also will serve the Lord, for he is our God."***

As the people of Israel made their choice to serve God here, we see that it was founded on their experience of his personal love for them. They had seen and experienced firsthand his powerful work on their behalf and his good intentions toward them as he rescued them from slavery, fought for them in battle and preserved them through all the dangers they had faced. They knew without a doubt that God had set his love on them and set them apart as his chosen people.

But they not only knew all this about God firsthand, they had also decided that they wanted him for their own. They not only believed in him and knew he is the one true God, they were ready to bind themselves to him. They said: *He is OUR God*. In other words, we want him and all that he has for us. We're accepting him and the gift of his love. And so much so, in fact, that it's a horrifying thought to think of actually forsaking him to pursue other gods...*far be it from us...God forbid...may it never be!!!* That's the sense of the words they're using here. For them it was a "no-brainer" to make that choice to serve him. What else in the world could be better!

May God give each of us this same attitude toward serving God and walking in his purposes. And may we always feel the same about doing anything that would hinder our fellowship with and connection to God. When we've experienced God's powerful work on our behalf; when we've seen him give us what we need for things we couldn't handle on our own; when we've experienced the great joy and peace of close fellowship with him; when we've understood that we're dead in the water and incapable of accomplishing his will in our own strength; then we'll be horrified to think of doing anything that would hinder that close,

connected relationship with him where he's providing us with everything we need.

### III. INCLINING THE HEART (Vs. 19 to 24)

Well, let's see how Joshua responds to Israel's decision to serve the Lord in verses 19 through 24, a section which I've called: *Inclining the Heart*:

***19 But Joshua said to the people, "You are not able to serve the Lord, for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins. 20 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." 21 And the people said to Joshua, "No, but we will serve the Lord." 22 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." 23 He said, "Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your heart to the Lord, the God of Israel." 24 And the people said to Joshua, "The Lord our God we will serve, and his voice we will obey."***

This is quite an interesting response from Joshua to their decision to serve the Lord, isn't it? Rather than just saying: *Great choice! Now go and do it*, Joshua tells them: *You can't do it! **You are not able to serve the Lord.*** I'm sure that must have gotten their attention! Do you think they may have wondered: *Then why did you ask us to do it, if it's not possible?*

Well, what Joshua wanted them to realize was their continuous need for humility and dependence on God. He wanted to protect them from that third place where many of God's people get out of rhythm with him...where they think they're capable of accomplishing God's will in their own strength and willpower...where they just get busy doing things for God without the connected relationship and empowering he provides. What we all need to realize and never forget is that we cannot serve the Lord as he intends without the strength he provides as we continually seek him and ask him for what we need.

You see God is holy, holy, holy, and serving him in a way that glorifies him and accomplishes his purposes can only be done when he does the work in and

through us as we follow him. Our efforts in our own strength by our own human wisdom always fall incredibly short of the glory of God. Remember that verse: ***Without faith it is impossible to please God.*** If we're not walking in the power of God as we trust him and call on him, we simply can't please him and effectively accomplish his will. **God's work needs to be done by God's power.**

Joshua also wanted the Israelites to be reminded of the fear of the Lord. He is a jealous God...jealous for his glory and the good of his people. It's an amazing gift and blessing to be in love relationship with the God of the universe and serving him, but being loved by the best Father in the universe also means being subject to the discipline of a loving Father. He wouldn't be a good Father if he allowed us to get off track and destroy ourselves without doing everything possible to point us back in the right direction.

Think about it: a person who isn't in relationship with God doesn't have this wonderful, yet sobering gift of being subject to God's discipline. Certainly they're subject to the inevitable consequences of sin and serving false gods and if they persist in rejecting God will eventually have to pay the penalty for their own sin in hell. But he doesn't discipline them during their lives on earth the way he does his own children. Instead he lets them fully pursue sin and what is false...he gives them over to it, as we're told in Romans. And his desire is that as they experience for themselves the destructiveness of sin, their eyes will be opened to their need for him and the one way out he provides through repentance of sin and faith in Jesus Christ.

But when it comes to God's own children, the discipline of a loving Father is a wonderful and yet a fearful reality. It's also a powerful motivation to keep us from drifting away from God. Joshua wanted the people of Israel to fully understand that this wonderful and fearful reality was part of the complete package of choosing to serve God. They needed to understand that they were signing up to serve a holy and jealous God who had set them apart for his purposes, who desired their good and protection, and whose deep love for them would not allow them to drift back into the destructive ways of sin and worship of false gods, without providing effective and painful discipline for the purpose of getting them back on track. And that discipline would continue until they returned to him.

Well, even after understanding this sobering reality, the people were undeterred from their desire and choice to serve the living God. They knew how good and powerful and loving God is and they were ready to accept everything involved in loving him and serving him. They would listen to him and obey his voice and follow him wherever he led. And Joshua called them to serve as their own witnesses for this choice they had publicly made to serve the Lord. And they agreed: ***“We are witnesses.”***

But now that Joshua had made sure the people of Israel knew what they were signing up for and had made them reconfirm and witness their own choice, he shared with them what I’d like to call *the secret of faithful service to the Living God*. Having reminded them that they were not able to serve the Lord in their own strength, he pointed them to the only way they would be able to pull this off. In order to effectively serve the Lord, they would need to do 2 things:

- 1) Put away the foreign gods;
- 2) Incline their hearts to the Lord, the God of Israel;

First of all, they would never be able to serve God if they were simultaneously trying to serve other gods. Put them away. Tear them down. Remove from your life those things that draw your affections away from full pursuit of God and walking in his purposes. In other words, if your choice is to serve God, you’re going to need to stop serving other things and allowing the God-substitutes to consume all of your time, energy and money.

What are the things other than God that have your heart right now? What are the things your heart is set on? Are these things satisfying your heart and providing you lasting joy and peace and fulfillment in life? Have you found that they’re pushing God to the side and where, if you’re honest, you’re really serving them instead of God? We’re focusing on your heart here for a purpose: Because the key to effectively serving God involves a turning of our hearts from false gods to the one true God. It involves reaching out and seeking and desiring the One who is true and has all that we desire and need, rather than reaching out and seeking and desiring all the empty things of the world.

Joshua tells the Israelites to throw away, discard, trash the false gods and then **incline their hearts to the Lord**. That Hebrew word translated, “incline,” means

to extend, stretch out or turn toward. This is a turning away from what is empty and false and from reliance on myself to a continual straining, stretching, reaching for God for all that I need. It's a giving up on trying to find my fulfillment and meaning and solutions to problems anywhere but in God.

This could be pictured like sunflowers, with God being the sun. Keeping our eyes fixed on the Son, following him wherever he goes... setting our minds on him... knowing him through his Word...believing he's the only source for what we need...we find everything we need to grow and produce a bumper crop of Sunflower seeds. Our eyes never leave him because we love him, he's our lifeblood, and we know he'll give us everything we need to navigate life and effectively serve him. This is a picture of what it looks like to incline our hearts to the Lord and it's the only way we become able to serve him effectively.

#### **IV. BECOMING ACCOUNTABLE (Vs. 25 to 28)**

Well this brings us to verses 25 to 28, a section I've titled: *Becoming Accountable*. Beginning in verse 25:

***25 So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and put in place statutes and rules for them at Shechem. 26 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. 27 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." 28 So Joshua sent the people away, every man to his inheritance.***

Well, we're back at the old oak tree. The *ESV* translates it as a terebinth tree...that ancient tree at Shechem where Abraham had long ago encountered the Lord himself and received the promise that his offspring would one day inherit this land. And now hundreds of years of later, at that same oak tree, Joshua renewed God's covenant one more time with the people of Israel who had just chosen to serve the Lord on this beautiful land he had given them. Joshua was doing everything possible to set the stage for God's people, now and in future generations, to remain faithful to their God and continue knowing how to walk in his ways as they inclined their hearts to him.

*Matthew Henry's Commentary* describes what's happening here this way:

“The service of God being thus made their deliberate choice, Joshua binds them to it by a solemn covenant, v. 25. Moses had twice publicly ratified this covenant between God and Israel, at Mount Sinai (Exod. xxiv.) and in the plains of Moab, Deut. xxix. 1. Joshua had likewise done it once (ch. viii. 31, &c.) and now the second time.” He did it here in three ways:

- 1) By calling witnesses (v. 22);
- 2) By putting it in writing, and inserting it into Scripture, as we see it here in Joshua;
- 3) By erecting a stone monument of it, v. 26, 27.

So what we see here is accountability for this choice they had made to serve God. They had publicly, with witnesses, committed to following God and their decision was recorded in writing and memorialized with a large stone that had been present when the Lord had spoken through Joshua to the Israelites and when the Israelites 3 times committed to serving the Lord. A similar process for us today would be baptism... when, after repenting of our sin and trusting in Jesus' Christ for salvation, we publicly declare with witnesses present our decision to trust him and follow him and serve him. We're binding ourselves to Christ in front of others and becoming accountable for that choice we've made to accept him as our Savior and Lord and begin living life as God's child.

Well, the choice had been made, reaffirmed twice, and then documented before witnesses in writing and in stone. Joshua had done all he could to prepare God's people to effectively serve the Lord in the Promised Land and now he was ready to die.

#### **V. A FEW FINAL NOTES (Vs. 29 to 33)**

Let's read the final 5 verses of the book of Joshua, which provide us with a few parting notes about what happened from here. Picking up in verse 29:

***29 After these things Joshua the son of Nun, the servant of the Lord, died, being 110 years old. 30 And they buried him in his own inheritance at Timnath-serah, which is in the hill country of Ephraim, north of the***

***mountain of Gaash. 31 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. 32 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 Hamor the father of Shechem for a hundred pieces of money. It became an inheritance of the descendants of Joseph. 33 And Eleazar 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.***

The closing words of the book of Joshua provide us with a few simple, straightforward facts about Joshua's death and burial, the burial of the bones of Joseph, and the death and burial of Eleazer the son of Aaron. I won't spend a lot of time rehashing what we just read. But what I do want to highlight from these final verses is that encouraging statement found in verse 31: ***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.***

Isn't it encouraging to know that effectively serving the Lord by his power as we incline our hearts to him is a real possibility? Even God's people of the Old Testament who didn't yet have, like us, God's Spirit dwelling inside, were able to faithfully serve him as they looked to him and reached out to him for what they needed. The people of Israel faithfully served the Lord for many years while those who had seen God's work firsthand were still alive. It wasn't until later that Israel in the period of the Judges began drifting away so dramatically as the new generation inclined their hearts to other things and lost their connection to the Lord and their desire to serve him.

## **VI. APPLICATION AND CONCLUSION**

Living life as a surrendered, effective, fruitful servant of the Lord, like Joshua, is something we really can do right here and now and for the rest of our lives as we turn away from the God-substitutes and incline our hearts to the Lord. This isn't just a pipe dream. This isn't just Christian idealism. This isn't just something that sounds great, but could never really happen in our lives. This is God's real purpose for our new lives in him right now and he's given us his Holy Spirit to guide us there. He's already planned out for you and I specific good works that he

wants to do through us by the power of his Spirit. We're meant to be temples of the living God where he dwells and reveals himself to others through us.

My brothers and sisters in Christ, God is fully committed to walking you and I into the life he intends for us. His love compels us. His Spirit calls to us. His Word shouts out the truth we need to hear and believe. He's even ready to effectively discipline us when we stubbornly cling to the things of the world instead of to him. Some of the challenges in our lives could actually be God's attempt to get our attention and turn us back to full pursuit of him. So I ask: Where is your heart inclined today? On what or who are you setting your affections? Is your heart like a sunflower, convinced that the Sun is the only place you can find what you need and focused on following him?

Did you know that they've done tests on sunflowers to see what would happen if they tried to grow them under fluorescent lights instead of outside following the sun? What do you think they discovered? Well, what they found is that the sunflowers soon lost their daily movement from east to west and their growth was severely stunted as compared to those outside following the sun. This is also what happens to us when we set our eyes on the fluorescent lights of the world's God-substitutes, instead of setting them on the Son and reaching out continually for him. Our growth is stunted, we lose our movement and progress, and we never walk into the good works God's prepared for us. And that's because those fluorescent lights of false gods can never give us what we need. All they do is distract us and pull us away from the true Light, apart from whom we can do nothing.

Are you ready to find yourself in being the true servant of the Lord like Joshua and Moses, serving with the strength he supplies as you incline your heart to him? I want to close today with a brief devotional from Charles Spurgeon on Psalm 138:8 that nicely wraps up what God's showed us today and the powerful message of the book of Joshua as a whole. Psalm 138:8 says this: ***The Lord will perfect that which concerneth me.*** Listen to Spurgeon's thoughts on this simple verse:

"Most manifestly the confidence which the Psalmist here expressed was a divine confidence. He did not say, "I have grace enough to perfect that which concerneth me—my faith is so steady that it will not stagger—my

love is so warm that it will never grow cold—my resolution is so firm that nothing can move it; no, his dependence was on the Lord alone.

If we indulge in any confidence which is not grounded on the Rock of ages, our confidence is worse than a dream, it will fall upon us, and cover us with its ruins, to our sorrow and confusion...”

“The Psalmist was wise, he rested upon nothing short of the Lord's work. It is the Lord who has begun the good work within us; it is He who has carried it on; and if he does not finish it, it never will be complete. If there be one stitch in the celestial garment of our righteousness which we are to insert ourselves, then we are lost; but this is our confidence, the Lord who began will perfect. He has done it all, must do it all, and will do it all. Our confidence must not be in what we have done, nor in what we have resolved to do, but entirely in what the Lord will do.”

“Unbelief insinuates— “You will never be able to stand. Look at the evil of your heart, you can never conquer sin; remember the sinful pleasures and temptations of the world that beset you, you will be certainly allured by them and led astray.” Ah! yes, we should indeed perish if left to our own strength. If we had alone to navigate our frail vessels over so rough a sea, we might well give up the voyage in despair; but, thanks be to God, He will perfect that which concerneth us, and bring us to the desired haven. We can never be too confident when we confide in Him alone, and never too much concerned to have such a trust.”

Incline your heart, extend it, stretch it out, turn it toward the Lord, and he will give you what you need and walk you into the good and powerful works he’s prepared for you! Set your heart on him and all he has for you.