

**Free to Choose – Joshua 24:1-15**  
Sermon – Pastor Joe Davis  
Union Baptist Church – 5/20/2018

**I. INTRODUCTION**

I want to share with you 3 words today as we begin. Are you ready? *Serve...servant...service*. What comes to mind when I say those words? I'll say them one more time: *Serve...servant...service*. Would you say these words appeal to you or do they make you think of things like slavery, bondage or having someone else tell you what to do all the time? How you feel about these 3 words may depend on whether you view yourself as the one being served or whether you're the one doing the serving. It's fun being served by someone else, isn't it? My Dad seemed to really enjoy it when I was a kid and he'd settle in to watch a TV show and then have me get him whatever he wanted throughout the show. I'm sure it was all about just doing his fatherly duty of training me to serve and had nothing to do with him enjoying being served and not wanting to get up off the couch!

To serve is to do something for the benefit of someone else. It involves putting aside ourselves and what we may want to do, to accomplish something that will be good for or will benefit someone outside of ourselves. And what you've probably noticed is that it's much more enjoyable and satisfying to serve someone voluntarily by your own free choice, rather than being forced to serve them. There's no better way to take away the joy of serving another person than to be forced to do it or because you have no other choice. Do it or else!

Have you ever noticed how much more fun it is to do something nice for your spouse or a family member when you thought of it and freely chose to do it out of your love for them, as opposed to being commanded to do it by them? The worst is when you've thought of doing something nice for your spouse but haven't quite gotten around to it yet, and then your spouse commands you to do now that very same thing you wanted to do for them but had been procrastinating about. Suddenly, the joy of doing it and surprising them is gone, and now you're just doing it because you're a deadbeat husband and if don't do it your wife's gonna make you pay!

The joy and the benefits of serving someone else are so much greater when we freely choose to do it and it flows out of the love we have for them.

Well, no matter how you feel about the words *serve*, *servant* and *service*, if you want to grow in your relationship with God through Christ and experience the fullness and joy of the life he intends for you, you're going to need to warm up to these 3 beautiful words. To the world without Christ they sound unappealing and humiliating and enslaving, but to the child of God they ironically represent the outcome of true freedom and the essence of life in the kingdom of God. In the God-breathed words of Paul from Galatians 5:13-15:

***For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."***

Through love serve one another. That's how God teaches us to use the freedom he's given to us. In his kingdom, true freedom leads to what might be considered a very strange place. It leads to the love-motivated, free-will, Holy-Spirit empowered choice to serve God and each other.

## **II. LIFE BEFORE GOD STEPPED IN (Vs. 1-2)**

And in today's passage from Joshua chapter 24, verses 1 through 15, this is what Joshua wants to share with the whole nation of Israel before he dies. Let's begin with verses 1 and 2, which I've labeled in your sermon notes: *Life Before God Stepped In*. Beginning in verse 1:

***1 Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel. And they presented themselves before God. 2 And Joshua said to all the people, "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, 'Long ago, your fathers lived beyond the Euphrates, Terah, the father of Abraham and of Nahor; and they served other gods.'***

As the final chapter of the book of Joshua begins, we find Joshua – near the end of his life, and soon after his recent meeting with just the leaders of Israel –

gathering together the whole nation...ALL the people of All the tribes...to a familiar place: *the town of Shechem*. SHOW POWERPOINT MAP. In the place where Joshua had earlier renewed God's covenant with the Israelites at the mountains of blessing and cursing, and built an altar and a stone monument containing the words of God's law, Joshua once again gathered all the people together to share a final message before he died.

In verse 1 we notice that the leaders once again came to Joshua, but this time we're also told they presented themselves before God. In other words they had prepared themselves to meet with God and were gathered together to hear from God through Joshua. They came with expectation that God was going to show up. And as Joshua begins to speak he makes it clear that what he's about to say is not his opinion or something he's come up with on his own. Instead, what he's about to say is directly from God himself: ***Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel. It's time to pay attention! God has an important word for you as I prepare to leave this world. He who has an ear hear what God says to his people.*** This is how Joshua introduces what he's about to say.

Well, the first statement God has to share through Joshua relates to life before God stepped in. And there's really not a lot to say about it. In fact, there was really only one important reality that God wanted to highlight about that time period, and that is this: *their fathers were serving other gods*. In the land beyond the Euphrates River, in the ancient city of Ur, the city of the moon god; Abraham's father and his family had served other gods. Like the rest of the world they were held captive by false gods...illusions offered up by Satan to keep people from knowing and living in relationship with the one true God. You see, everyone serves someone, whether they want to or not, and God described Abraham's family as serving what is false. *Stuck...enslaved... deceived*. These are the words that describe Abraham's family before God stepped in.

I want you to notice as we study this passage today how it parallels a very familiar New Testament passage and delivers the same message. That passage is Ephesians chapter 2, verses 1 through 10. How does the Apostle Paul describe life for you and I before God stepped in? Listen to Ephesians 2, verses 1 through 3:

***1 And you were dead in the trespasses and sins 2 in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the***

***power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— 3 among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.***

Before God stepped in you and I were walking dead zombies, enslaved to the devil and his false gods, and living as enemies of the one true God, subject to his wrath. And we weren't doing anything to deserve his mercy, love and rescuing...not a thing! And just as this was true for each of us before Christ, the same was true for Abraham and his family. This was life before God stepped in.

### **III. LIFE AFTER GOD STEPPED IN (Vs. 3-13)**

Now let's take a look at verses 3 through 13, which I'd like to call: *Life After God Stepped In*. As we read these verses, pay close attention to what God did contrasted with what the people of Israel did. Remember God himself is speaking through Joshua here. Beginning in verse 3:

***3 Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan, and made his offspring many. I gave him Isaac. 4 And to Isaac I gave Jacob and Esau. And I gave Esau the hill country of Seir to possess, but Jacob and his children went down to Egypt. 5 And I sent Moses and Aaron, and I plagued Egypt with what I did in the midst of it, and afterward I brought you out.***

***6 "Then I brought your fathers out of Egypt, and you came to the sea. And the Egyptians pursued your fathers with chariots and horsemen to the Red Sea. 7 And when they cried to the Lord, he put darkness between you and the Egyptians and made the sea come upon them and cover them; and your eyes saw what I did in Egypt. And you lived in the wilderness a long time.***

***8 Then I brought you to the land of the Amorites, who lived on the other side of the Jordan. They fought with you, and I gave them into your hand, and you took possession of their land, and I destroyed them before you. 9 Then Balak the son of Zippor, king of Moab, arose and fought against Israel. And he sent and invited Balaam the son of Beor to curse you, 10 but***

***I would not listen to Balaam. Indeed, he blessed you. So I delivered you out of his hand.***

***11 And you went over the Jordan and came to Jericho, and the leaders of Jericho fought against you, and also the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. And I gave them into your hand. 12 And I sent the hornet before you, which drove them out before you, the two kings of the Amorites; it was not by your sword or by your bow. 13 I gave you a land on which you had not labored and cities that you had not built, and you dwell in them. You eat the fruit of vineyards and olive orchards that you did not plant.'***

I'm not sure anybody could read these verses without concluding that they're about what God did. Over and over and over we hear God saying things like...I took...I led...I gave...I plagued...I brought...I made...I destroyed...I delivered...I sent. Take a look at this summary of all the things God did in these verses. SHOW THE FOLLOWING LIST ON POWERPOINT:

### **What God Did**

Took Abraham from beyond the River  
Led Abraham through the land of Canaan  
Made Abraham's offspring many  
Gave Abraham Isaac  
Gave Isaac Jacob and Esau  
Gave Esau the hill country of Seir  
Sent Moses and Aaron  
Plagued Egypt with what He did there  
Brought the people of Israel out of Egypt  
Put darkness between Israel and Egyptians  
Made the sea come upon and cover the Egyptians  
Brought Israel to the land of the Amorites  
Gave the Amorites into Israel's hand  
Destroyed the Amorites before Israel  
Would not listen to Balaam  
Made Balaam bless Israel instead of curse them  
Delivered Israel out of Balaam's hand

Gave all peoples from Canaan into Israel's hand  
Sent the hornet before Israel to drive them out  
Gave Israel land on which they had not labored  
Gave Israel cities they had not built  
Gave them fruit they did not plant

Do you think God might have been the source of everything the Israelites had and all the victories they had experienced and all the blessings they were enjoying?! God freed Abraham from slavery to false gods, he led him through the beautiful Promised Land, and he miraculously gave him Isaac in his old age and through him multiplied his descendants. God with great signs and wonders freed the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. He rescued them from pursuing enemies by parting the Red Sea. He turned cursings into blessings. He destroyed all the enemies they came against. And he gave them that beautiful land he had long ago promised to Abraham. All of this was God's doing, not theirs.

It's interesting to notice, in contrast, *what the Israelites did*. First, we see they started out by serving other gods until God rescued them. But then as we look at the things God describes them as doing from there, this is what we find:

- 1) They walked around following where God led them;
- 2) They cried out to the Lord when in danger from enemies;
- 3) They saw with their own eyes what God did;
- 4) They followed God into battles and watched him win them;
- 5) They received title to and took possession of land they had not labored on and cities they had not built;
- 6) They ate fruit from trees they did not plant.

In short, *they simply cried out to God and followed him wherever he led*. They let him be their shepherd. That's the heart of what God was calling them to do. And as they did so, they saw God give them everything they needed, watched him win their battles, and received undeserved blessing after blessing. It sounds like a pretty good deal for them, doesn't it? And just in case they were still tempted to take credit for it all, God reminded them that their victories had not come by their sword or bow and that the gifts they had received had not been worked for or earned. It was all God's doing as an expression of his deep love for his people and his good intentions toward them.

This all sounds so familiar, doesn't it? Because this is still the way God works today. Consider our parallel passage from Ephesians chapter 2, this time verses 4 through 9. After Paul described you and I before Christ as walking dead zombies, enslaved to the devil and his false gods, and living as enemies of the one true God, this is how describes life for us after God stepped in:

***4 But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, 5 even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ— by grace you have been saved— 6 and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, 7 so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. 8 For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, 9 not a result of works, so that no one may boast.***

God, rich in mercy and filled with great love for us even when we were his enemies, stepped into our zombie life and brought us to true eternal life with the resurrected Jesus...not because we deserved it, but because of his great mercy, love and grace and because for eternity he wanted to show the immeasurable riches of his grace to every living creature in the universe. And how's he going to do that? By his great kindness poured out on the undeserving who will simply cast themselves on his mercy through faith in Christ; letting him take their shame, pay the penalty they deserve for their sins, and walk them into true life and freedom; connected with him and following his lead. For both the nation of Israel in the time of Joshua and for us today, it's all about what God did and continues to do in those who will simply trust him and accept what he's done on their behalf, and then start following him; all of which we still can only do by his grace and his work within us as we continually *cry out to him*.

#### **IV. A CALL TO CHOOSE (Vs. 14-15)**

And this brings us to our final two verses for today, verses 14 and 15. God's message to the Israelites through Joshua contrasted their lives before God stepped in, with the dramatic changes and power of God they had experienced after he had stepped in. Now Joshua wants to help the Israelites answer the question: *So what? How is God asking you to respond to what he's done and*

*continues to do for you?* Let's see how Joshua answers this question in verses 14 and 15. I've labeled this section: *A Call to Choose*. Joshua said:

***14 "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. 15 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, we will serve the Lord."***

Well, that key word, "therefore," hopefully popped out at you as we read those verses. Whenever you see that word in Scripture, take note, because it usually indicates God's about to give you clear insight into what he wants you to take away from what you've just read...how he wants you to respond to the truths that have just been shared. And in this case, God's take-away for the Israelites and for us is so simple and easy to understand. It involves just a simple choice that needs to be made right now and then moment-by-moment every day for the rest of our lives: *Choose this day whom you will serve*. There's that idea of serving again. You will serve somebody. The only question is, whom will it be?

God had given the Israelites so many reasons to choose him and serve him with all they had. He'd just outlined for them a small sampling of what they had seen with their own eyes that showed how deeply he loved them and was willing and ready to work for their good with great power as they cried out to him and followed him. But still they would have to choose how to respond and then continue to choose each day. God was not going to force them to respond with gratitude by serving him. He'd shown them his love and his commitment to them, but now they were free to choose how to respond to that love.

Now as Joshua calls for a response, notice that he clearly outlines what God is asking of them, should they choose him. It has three parts. First they would need to *fear the Lord*. They would need to honor and give glory to him and recognize that he is the one true, holy God of all power and majesty, who's not be trifled with, or made light of, or disrespected, and who's given very clear guidelines about how to worship him and live in healthy relationship with him. ***The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom***. In other words, without it, we simply can't

be wise. We'll remain fools, no matter how intellectually smart we might seem to the world around us.

Secondly, should the Israelites choose God, they would need to actually serve him; not half-heartedly or sporadically or just when they felt like it, but with wholehearted sincerity and faithfulness. God's calling his children not to just soak up all his blessings and then do whatever they please until they die, clutching their ticket to heaven. Instead, he's blessing and loving and empowering and fighting for them, so that they'll start living life as he intended...well-equipped to accomplish his purposes by his power and display his glory to the rest of the world.

And thirdly, should the Israelites choose to fear the Lord and serve him, they would need to put away those false gods. God is a jealous god, in a very good way; jealous for his glory and for the good of his people. He will not stand idly by while the people he has set apart for himself waste their lives and harm themselves over and over again by pursuing the empty and always disappointing false gods of this world. Put them away. Tear them down. Root out those things that are keeping you from fully pursuing the Lord and serving him with your whole heart. God's rescued you for a purpose and what a shame it would be if those whom God rescued from serving false gods, went right back to doing the same thing.

As Joshua shared with the Israelites the "therefore" of God's personal message to them about his great work in their lives and the amazing gifts he had given them, he was calling them to make a choice. They were free to choose, just like you and I are. God had rescued them and fought for them for a purpose. Now they needed to choose whether they were going to continue following God into that purpose, or whether they were going to return to their empty way of living life before he arrived. And as we look again at our parallel Ephesians passage, we see Paul outlining for us as well, in chapter 2, verse 10, the purpose for which God has rescued us in Christ and given us new life and power. He says:

***For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.***

God re-created us and brought us to new life in Christ for a purpose. And that purpose is that we walk into the good works he's prepared for each of us to do by his power...in short, that we put away the false gods and serve him in sincerity and faithfulness...accomplishing his purposes by his power so that others can come to new life in him as well.

## V. APPLICATION AND CONCLUSION

But we still have a choice, don't we? Just like the Israelites, even though we've been rescued by God and empowered by him, he still gives us the freedom to choose whom we're going to serve from here. And this is a choice we need to make now and in every choice we make each day. *Is my life going to be about serving God or serving myself and the gods of this world? In this choice I need to make right now, will I serve God or will I serve myself?* My prayer for each of us today, is that by God's grace as we cry out to him continually, we will, like Joshua, more and more choose sincere and faithful service to our good God...putting our selfish purposes aside and saying, "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord!" This is God's purpose for us in Christ.

This choice can seem disagreeable and undesirable for those who don't know God and what he's like. But for those who do know the goodness and love and mercy of the one true God, choosing to use their freedom to serve him is the best choice they could ever make. As Jesus himself said:

Matt 20:26-28

***But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, 27 and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, 28 even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."***

I hope you're warming up to the words *serve*, *servant* and *service*. And you know what? When the focus of our lives becomes serving God and serving others we're going to, ironically, find even more freedom... freedom we'll never find in serving the tempting God-substitutes that are all around us in the world. All they do is suck us dry and chain us up and leave us empty and exhausted. *Are you serving anything in your life right now that's doing that to you?* Put it away. Set it aside.

Ask God for what you need to let it go for good and get after the purpose for which he recreated you in Christ.

I hope you've been impacted today by how powerful God is to rescue his people, provide them everything they need to serve him, fight effectively on their behalf, and give them good and gracious gifts. But do we really believe in our hearts what we saw in his Word today? Do we really believe that he's just as committed and effective today to give us everything we need to serve him and accomplish his will? Do we truly believe, in a way that leads to courageous action, the words of 2 Corinthians 9, verse 8:

***And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work.***

Is that an amazing verse, or what? When we seek to walk into the good works God's prepared for us, as we follow him and call out for the power of his Spirit, he will give us everything we need...we can count on it!...having all sufficiency in all things at all times, he will enable us to abound in every good work. This is a picture of a cup running over. He doesn't just give us a few drops of water to let us barely scrape by in accomplishing his will; instead he causes a bubbling spring of water to burst forth and overflow our cup. So what are we waiting for? Why are we so shy about sharing the hope we have in Christ and expressing God's love to others by both words and good works? God's told us he'll give us everything we need. We'll be as well-equipped and supported by God as the Israelites were in conquering the Promised Land!

We must always remember that God calls us to be his servants, but he doesn't call us to do it in our own strength. He calls us to do it by following him through his Word and walking in the strength he will supply as we call on him continually. Jesus said, ***"If anyone serves Me, he must follow Me; and where I am, there My servant will be also..."*** (John 12:26). And Peter said that whoever serves must do it ***"...as one who serves by the strength God supplies – in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ..."*** (see 1 Peter 4:10-11). Our new lives of service to God are just as much a work of God as our rescuing from slavery to sin was! We can only walk into the good works God has prepared for us when we follow Jesus and learn to walk by the power of his Spirit dwelling inside.

Are you ready for what God has for you? Are you ready to see his glory revealed through you to a world that's enslaved and without hope? God's ready when you are and he will make all grace abound to you when you're ready to make the full focus of your life serving him by the strength he supplies.

And if there's anyone here today who hasn't yet come into relationship with God by turning from sin and putting your faith in Christ, I appeal to you today to choose him. You know in your heart that life apart from God and serving the empty things the world has to offer is getting you nowhere...it's leaving you empty and unfulfilled and chained up and exhausted. Why not let God do for you today, what he did for Abraham and for the Israelites...rescuing you and freeing you from slavery to sin and the false gods of this world? Choose Christ today and enter new life and freedom and begin the life God desires for you!

### **A Prayer to Accept God's Free Gift of Salvation**

God, I admit that I have sinned against You...  
I turn from that sin right now...  
I don't want to live my life that way anymore...  
Jesus, I believe that you died on the cross for my sins...  
And that you rose from the dead...  
Right now, I put my trust in You alone for my salvation...  
Jesus, You are my Lord and my Savior...My life is Yours...  
Thank you for forgiving my sins and making me a new creation...  
Thank you for giving me Your Holy Spirit and adopting me as your child...  
Teach me through Your Word how to live life with You...  
Amen.

**SERMON APPLICATION AND DISCUSSION GUIDE – 5/20/2018**  
***Free to Choose – Joshua 24:1-15***

**Read Joshua 24:1-15, asking the Holy Spirit to guide you as you read. Look at the surrounding verses, take your time and talk to God as you read and meditate on it. Think through the following, writing notes and thoughts and looking up related scriptures as needed:**

Write down from the passage or from what was shared in the sermon: 1) a truth that stands out to you; 2) anything you believe God is showing you or telling you personally through it; 3) any related Scripture that comes to mind; 4) any questions you have.

Describe some of the characteristics of your life before you came to know Christ.

What are some things that have changed in your life since you came to know Christ? What evidences have you seen of God's work in your life?

How would you describe what it means to fear the Lord? Why is it important?

How would you describe what it means to serve the Lord?

Read the following verses and summarize below what they teach you about God's perspective on serving: Romans 7:4-6; Galatians 5:13-15; 1 Peter 4:10-11; John 12:23-26; Colossians 3:23-24; Galatians 1:10.

**Summarize below anything God is calling you personally to believe, any actions God is asking you to take, or any attitudes He wants to change. Repent where needed and enjoy God's mercy. Then pray over these items and make a plan for change by the power of the Spirit.**