

Vital Decision
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Joshua 24:14-24

Decisions. We make hundreds, maybe thousands of them every day. Life is filled with decisions big and small; deciding cannot be avoided. Even if you refuse to decide, that is a decision. It's no wonder we hear about "decision fatigue." Think about our pampered "first world problem" life. What are some examples of daily decisions that are not life changing but can still be surprisingly irritating?

Most of those decisions won't matter a week from now. But Joshua 24 brings us face to face with the one decision that affects not only the course of our lives but our eternal destiny: "Choose this day whom you will serve." It is a decision that cannot be avoided.

The great philosopher Bob Dylan was theologically correct when he wrote: *"You're gonna have to serve somebody."*

*You may be an ambassador to England or France
You may like to gamble, you might like to dance
You may be the heavyweight champion of the world
You may be a socialite with a long string of pearls
But you're gonna have to serve somebody
Yes indeed, you're gonna have to serve somebody
Well, it may be the Devil or it may be the Lord
But you're gonna have to serve somebodyⁱ*

Christopher Ash writes: *"Martin Luther observed that 'if a man will not have God, he must have his idols...' and John Calvin declared that 'the human heart is a factory of idols.' These statements capture the essential reality—worship is not optional for human beings. The question is never whether we'll worship, but whom we'll worship."*ⁱⁱ

The Point: Human beings are wired to worship something or someone. We must decide whom we will serve. Eternal life doesn't come by osmosis simply because we attend church or grow up around Christianity. God's free gift of salvation (grace) is received only by personally trusting in Jesus Christ (faith). That requires a decision.

A little context before the text: As Joshua's life drew to a close, he gathered Israel at Shechem, reminded them of God's faithfulness from Abraham to the conquest of Canaan, warned them against compromise and idolatry, and challenged them to renew their covenant with the Lord. (Josh. 23:1–24:13)

(NLT) — 14 "So fear the Lord and serve him wholeheartedly. Put away forever the idols your ancestors worshiped when they lived beyond the Euphrates River and in Egypt. Serve the Lord alone. **15** But if you refuse to serve the Lord, then choose today whom you will serve. Would you prefer the gods your ancestors served beyond the

Euphrates? Or will it be the gods of the Amorites in whose land you now live? But as for me and my family, we will serve the Lord.”

- Verse 14: Joshua didn't "beat around the bush"; he "laid it on the line. What did he say is required to serve God? What does “fear” mean in this context?
- This was not a new concept. Moses told their parents and grandparents forty years before: *“And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you? He requires only that you fear the Lord your God, and live in a way that pleases him, and love him and serve him with all your heart and soul.”* (Deut. 10:12) (NLT)
- Joshua didn't just challenge them to serve God; he warned them about idols.
- We cannot present Christ as Savior without also presenting Him as Lord.
- The first of the Ten Commandments: *“You shall have no other gods before me.”*ⁱⁱⁱ
- It is possible to have an idol and not realize it and idols are not necessarily always bad things. How can something (even something good) become an idol?
- After Joshua defined the decision, he led by example: *“...as for me and my family, we will serve the Lord.”* One of the most famous sentences in scripture.
- Some families have it in a frame hanging on the wall of their home.
- Last Sunday in his message, Pastor Rick Young said a great thing (I'm paraphrasing). Children need to see that their parents love the Lord Jesus.
- It's fine to put *“as for me and my house”* in a frame but do we demonstrate it consistently (not perfectly but consistently) to our family and friends?
- Verse 16, the people replied:

16 ... “We would never abandon the Lord and serve other gods. **17** For the Lord our God is the one who rescued us and our ancestors from slavery in the land of Egypt. He performed mighty miracles before our very eyes. As we traveled through the wilderness among our enemies, he preserved us. **18** It was the Lord who drove out the Amorites and the other nations living here in the land. So we, too, will serve the Lord, for he alone is our God.”

- Good job, people of Israel! You understand the choice and have decided well.
- At this point we might have sung the doxology and sent them home! Not Joshua.

19 Then Joshua warned the people, “You are not able to serve the Lord, for he is a holy and jealous God. He will not forgive your rebellion and your sins. **20** If you abandon the Lord and serve other gods, he will turn against you and destroy you, even though he has been so good to you.”

- Based on what you know about the family history of these people, why would Joshua have repeated himself?
- Wiersbe: *“When the former generation had met the Lord at Mt. Sinai, they had said, “All that the Lord has spoken we will do” (Ex. 19:8, NKJV). But a few weeks later, they were worshiping a golden calf! Joshua knew that it was easy for the people to promise obedience to the Lord, but it was quite something else for them to actually do it. His stern words were meant to curb their overconfidence and make them look honestly into their own hearts (Josh. 24:19).”*^{iv}

- In verse 19 Joshua says, *"You are not able to serve the Lord..."*
- At first that sounds discouraging. What truth was Joshua trying to impress on the people? Why is it actually encouraging?
- When we share the gospel, we should be honest to say that the Christian life is not merely difficult -- it is impossible in our own strength. That truth isn't meant to discourage us but to drive us to Christ. None of us can earn God's favor or live the Christian life by our own effort. Here's the good news:
- **John 15:5 (NLT)** Jesus said, "...For apart from me you can do nothing."
- **Philippians 4:13 (NLT)** I can do everything through Christ, who gives me strength.
- Through Christ's righteousness we are accepted by God, and through the indwelling Holy Spirit we are empowered to obey and serve Him.

21 But the people answered Joshua, "No, we will serve the Lord!" **22** "You are a witness to your own decision," Joshua said. "You have chosen to serve the Lord." "Yes," they replied, "we are witnesses to what we have said." **23** "All right then," Joshua said, "destroy the idols among you, and turn your hearts to the Lord, the God of Israel." **24** The people said to Joshua, "We will serve the Lord our God. We will obey him alone."

- Joshua said, *"you are witnesses"* and the people agreed. They could not say they had been forced into relationship with God.^v They decided to serve Him.
- Some commentators rightfully compare this to a covenant wedding ceremony. Saying they were "witnesses" was like marriage vows they were making.
- Wiersbe again, *"Israel was 'married' to Jehovah, and He would not tolerate any rivals in their hearts. He is a jealous God (Ex. 20:5) and a holy God, and He could never permit them to be divided in their loyalty. Just as a husband and wife are faithful to their marriage vows and jealously guard their mate's affection, so Israel and the Lord had to be faithful to each other."*^{vi}
- Comparing our devotion to God to marriage, we all know spouses can drift apart if they don't work on their marriage relationship.
- What are some subtle ways we can drift from wholehearted devotion to God?
- Here are some verses that remind us to protect our relationship with God:
 - **Joshua 23:11 (NLT)** — **11** So be very careful to love the Lord your God.
 - **Deuteronomy 6:5 (NLT)** — **5** And you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your strength.
 - **Proverbs 4:23 (NLT)** — **23** Guard your heart above all else, for it determines the course of your life.
 - **Matthew 6:21 (NLT)** — **21** Wherever your treasure is, there the desires of your heart will also be.
 - **Luke 9:23 (NLT)** — **23** Then he said to the crowd, "If any of you wants to be my follower, you must give up your own way, take up your cross daily, and follow me.
 - **Hebrews 2:1 (NLT)** — **1** So we must listen very carefully to the truth we have heard, or we may drift away from it.
 - **Revelation 2:4–5 (NLT)** — **4** [To the church at Ephesus] "But I have this complaint against you. You don't love me or each other as you did at first!

5 Look how far you have fallen! Turn back to me and do the works you did at first. If you don't repent, I will come and remove your lampstand from its place among the churches.

- **1 John 5:21 (NLT) — 21** Dear children, keep away from anything that might take God's place in your hearts.

So, What's the Takeaway?

- Bob Dylan was right: *"You're gonna have to serve somebody."*
- Human beings are wired to worship something or someone.
- Joshua challenged Israel (and us) that we must decide whom we will serve.
- It is a decision we cannot avoid. Refusing to decide IS a decision.
- Salvation is available by God's grace, but every person must decide by faith to follow Christ as both Savior and Lord.
- Those of us who have made that vital decision should live in such a way that those we love and those around us can sense that our testimony is: *"As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."*
- Choosing Christ is a once-for-all decision. Keeping Christ on the throne of our hearts is a daily decision. The first commandment and Joshua's speech make it clear. God is a jealous God and He will not tolerate idols that compete with Him.
- When we feel our hearts growing cool toward the things of God, let's just start humming that old hymn: *"I have decided to follow Jesus, no turning back."*^{vii}

ⁱ Gotta Serve Somebody lyrics © Special Rider Music, Universal Tunes. Songwriter: Bob Dylan

ⁱⁱ Christopher Ash, [*Remaking a Broken World: A Fresh Look at the Bible Storyline*](#) (Crownhill, Milton Keynes: Authentic Media, 2010).

ⁱⁱⁱ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Ex 20:3). (2025). Crossway Bibles.

^{iv} Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *Be Strong* (p. 155). Victor Books.

^v Barry, J. D., Mangum, D., Brown, D. R., Heiser, M. S., Custis, M., Ritzema, E., Whitehead, M. M., Grigoni, M. R., & Bomar, D. (2012, 2016). *Faithlife Study Bible* (Jos 24:22). Lexham Press.

^{vi} Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *Be Strong* (p. 155). Victor Books.

^{vii} https://hymnary.org/text/i_have_decided_to_follow_jesus