

CHALLENGED
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Joshua 24:14-28

Opening: *“Why do you keep this junk!”* Has your spouse ever asked you that question while cleaning out a closet or a drawer? In our lives we hold on to things that remind us of something significant from our past. Souvenirs are trinkets that remind us of fun we’ve had. Mementos remind us of special times in our life. Then there are objects that bring to mind something important and significant from our past. **Can you think of some examples of objects that are symbols that bring to mind something significant?**

To be clear, we must be careful not to give too much status to “religious” objects. We worship God in spirit so we don’t need to possess any physical object in order to approach His throne. Yet, scripture teaches us that memorials and symbols are legitimate reminders of God’s faithfulness to us, and commitments we’ve made to Him. Nine times in the book of Joshua, God’s people stacked up stones of remembrance.¹

As we turn the last page of the book of Joshua, we see this great leader closing out his life with a challenge for the people of Israel. Before he left them, Joshua knew he needed to confirm they were serious about serving ONLY the one true God. He needed to leave them with a “stone of remembrance” to stand as a “witness” to that commitment.

This is a good lesson at the beginning of a new year. It’s a good time to reflect on God’s faithfulness and mercy to us, and our response to Him.

The big idea: We need to be reminded from time to time to look back at God’s goodness and mercy; to look closely at our relationship with Him; and to renew our commitment to worship and serve Him and only Him.

In the first thirteen verses of this chapter, Joshua recounts for the people of Israel the history of God's goodness. He reminds them of how God brought them out of slavery, through the wilderness, and safely to their promised land. Then Joshua gave them a serious challenge:

Joshua 24:14–26 (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.”

¹⁶ The people replied, “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.”

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.”

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.”

²⁵ So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day at Shechem, committing them to follow the decrees and regulations of the Lord.

²⁶ Joshua recorded these things in the Book of God's Instructions. As a reminder of their agreement, he took a huge stone and rolled it beneath the terebinth tree beside the Tabernacle of the Lord.

- Verse 14: **What three instructions did Joshua give the Israelites that also apply to every follower of Christ?**
- Verse 14 paraphrased: We don't really know God unless we approach Him with respect, awe, and submission! We don't really serve God unless it's with everything we have. We don't really worship God if anything else is crowding Him out of our lives.
- Joshua goes on to say that the people had to put away any other god.
- Depending on your translation, the wording of verse 15 is interesting.
- "If it is evil in your eyes to serve the Lord..." What?
- NASB: "disagreeable"; NIV: "undesirable"; NLT: "if you refuse to serve..."
- If we don't worship God in the way He demands, it's as if we find it "distasteful" to serve Him at all. No true believer "holds their nose" to worship God. Serving Him is a pleasing aroma! His yoke is easy!
- So, Joshua "calls the question," CHOOSE which God you will serve!
- Then Joshua says, as for me and mine, we will serve the Lord!
- **How does that statement demonstrate great leadership?**
- **Verses 16-18: How did the people reply? Was Joshua buying it?**
- A weak, people-pleasing leader might have said, "Good, now that we're clear on that let's get on with our new life here in the promised land!"
- Instead, Joshua gets right back "in their faces" in verse 19: "*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.*"
- Not able to serve the Lord? He won't forgive my sins? That was shocking! That sentence is the same in every translation I consulted. **What do you think Joshua meant by "not able to serve the Lord?" In what way would that be true for us today?**
- God is "holy" and "jealous." **What does that mean?**
- **What does the term "mutually exclusive" mean? Example: Coin toss.**

- Here's what we know about human beings: you WILL worship something or someone. Wiersbe's term for this: humanity is "incurably religious."²
- It's not a question of will you worship, it's WHO (or what) will you worship!
- Anything that takes away from our love and devotion to God is a substitute god. We call that an idol! Even those of us who are saved can tend to drift.
- **Now that they possessed the Promised Land, why was Joshua so skeptical that these people would drift away from devotion to God?**
- A sad reality about human beings: The more blessed we are the more we tend to drift from a singular, dedicated focus on God. As the old hymn-writer put it: *"prone to wander, Lord I feel it, prone to leave the God I love."*
- Verse 20: There are consequences for wandering. *"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."* Wow! Scary thought!
- That got the people's attention, and again they insisted: *"No, we will serve the Lord!"* So, Joshua said, okay, *"...you are a witness to your own decision, you have chosen to serve the Lord." If you don't mean this its ON YOU!*
- So Joshua made a covenant (contract) with the people and wrote in a book what they had promised. Then as a reminder of their promise, he took a huge stone and rolled it beneath an oak tree beside the Tabernacle. A stone of remembrance, a symbol of their commitment.

So, What's the Takeaway?

1 Samuel 12:24 (ESV) is a good summary of Joshua's challenge:
²⁴ Only fear the Lord and serve him faithfully with all your heart. For consider what great things he has done for you.

- **Anyone ever renew your marriage vows? Why do people do this? Are they any more married because they did?**
- Renewing your marriage vows doesn't make you any more married, but it does remind you of how married you are!

- When I was a little boy I would see people who professed to be saved followers of Christ walk the aisle on the invitation. They were publically “rededicating” their lives to Christ. They weren’t any more saved, but they were publically recommitting to remember just how saved they were!
- I had a great idea for a visual reminder for this lesson, but the winter storm derailed my plan. I pictured giving each of you a small, smooth stone with the word “CHOSEN” written on it

- That word would remind us that if we’re a follower of Christ, we’re Chosen BY God, and have CHOSEN to serve God.



- In this chapter Joshua calls the question: Whom will you worship, whom will you serve? God doesn’t share His glory.
- Jesus also always calls the question: You have to decide, you have to choose, only one side of this coin can be facing up. I am the way and there is no other!
- For those of us who are followers of Christ, this lesson is a great reminder that from time to time we need to take stock of our relationship with Christ.
- We need to honestly ask ourselves: is anything crowding in on God’s place in our lives? There’s only room on the throne of our hearts for one.
- We need to look back at God’s goodness and mercy; to look closely at our relationship with Him; and to renew our commitment to worship and serve Him and only Him.
- It won’t make us any more saved, but it will help us recommit to remember just how saved we are!

Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *Be Strong* (pp. 155–156). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.
The nine memorials are:

1. The stones in the midst of the Jordan (4:9).
2. The stones on the western bank of the Jordan (4:20–24).
3. The stones in the Valley of Achor (7:26).
4. The heap of stones at Ai (8:29).
5. The altar on Mt. Ebal (8:30).
6. The stones of the law on Mt. Ebal (8:32).
7. The stones at the cave at Makkedah (10:27).
8. The altar built by the Transjordanic tribes (22:10ff).
9. Joshua's stone of witness (24:26–28).¹

² Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *Be Strong* (p. 154). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.