



**Sunday School Lesson for September 24, 2006
Released on September 20, 2006**

"Covenant Renewed"

Printed Text: Joshua 24:1, 14-24

Background Scripture: Joshua 24:1-33

Devotional Reading: Psalm 51:1-12

Joshua 24:1, 14-24

1 And Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and called for the elders of Israel, and for their heads, and for their judges, and for their officers; and they presented themselves before God.

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14 Now therefore fear the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in truth; and put away the gods which your fathers served on the other side of the flood, and in Egypt; and serve ye the Lord.

15 And if it seem evil unto you to serve the Lord, choose you this day whom ye will serve; whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the flood, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land ye dwell: but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.

16 And the people answered and said, God forbid that we should forsake the Lord, to serve other gods;

17 For the Lord our God, he it is that brought us up and our fathers out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage, and which did those great signs in our sight, and preserved us in all the way wherein we went, and among all the people through whom we passed:

18 And the Lord drave out from before us all the people, even the Amorites which dwelt in the land: therefore will we also serve the Lord; for he is our God.

19 And Joshua said unto the people, Ye cannot serve the Lord: for he is a holy God; he is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions nor your sins.

20 If ye forsake the Lord, and serve strange gods, then he will turn and do you hurt, and consume you, after that he hath done you good.

21 And the people said unto Joshua, Nay; but we will serve the Lord.

22 And Joshua said unto the people, Ye are witnesses against yourselves that ye have chosen you the Lord, to serve him. And they said, We are witnesses.

23 Now therefore put away, said he, the strange gods which are among you, and incline your heart unto the Lord God of Israel.

24 And the people said unto Joshua, The Lord our God will we serve, and his voice will we obey.

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each student will be able to:

1. Describe the renewal of the covenant by Israel in the last days of Joshua's life.
2. Evaluate the benefits that come from regular reviews of commitments to God.
3. Make a plan for periodic reaffirmations of faithfulness to God.

Introduction - Seeing the Potential

A very ordinary, jagged piece of marble may seem as nothing in the eyes of the average person. It can, however, become an elaborate, detailed statue when shaped by the hands of an experienced sculptor. A rough-hewn block of wood may seem fit only to be burned. However, it can be carved into a thing of polished beauty by a master craftsman.

A conscientious teacher or youth worker cannot look at a group of students as immature and time-consuming. For there may be one or more in that group who, with careful teaching, can become great leaders for God and humankind. A slave people in a foreign land may appear to be nothing, but they may be chosen by the God of Heaven and earth to receive a special covenant. Despite their many failures in being faithful, in the fullness of time that nation can have the Son of God as one of its offspring—the long-awaited Messiah who offers salvation to all.

The potential within each person obviously is different. If, however, each person's resolve to fulfill his or her potential is combined with God's discipline and love, that potential can be realized.

Lesson Background

The biblical accounts are usually interpreted to show that the Israelites spent 11 months and 20 days at Sinai, from the first day of the third month (Exodus 19:1) to the twentieth day of the second month of the second year (Numbers 10:11). At that time the cloud lifted from the tabernacle, and the journey to Canaan continued.

While at Sinai, other details of the law were given. The Israelites were instructed how to build the tabernacle, and it was constructed according to the pattern given. The incident of the golden calf (Exodus 32) was a sobering event during Moses' 40 days on the mount. The intricacies of the sacrificial system and the priesthood are given in the book of Leviticus. Numbers 1:3 tells of a military census of all men who were age 20 and older. The total was 603,550 (2:32).

As the nation of Israel approached Canaan, 12 spies were sent into the land. Ten of the spies brought back a negative message of fear, and they prevailed over the minority report of Caleb and Joshua (Numbers 13). The punishment was announced by the Lord: the people were to spend a total of 40 years as shepherds in the desert (one year for each day the spies were gone; 14:33, 34); all the men of war except Caleb and Joshua were to perish in the wilderness (14:38). This means that 603,548 did not reach Canaan. That is an average of more than 40 deaths per day if we count only men age 20 and over!

The Israelites ultimately were successful in conquering the lands east of the Jordan. Two and one-half tribes were granted permission to settle on that side. Moses died at the age of 120, and the leadership fell to Joshua.

The miraculous crossing of the Jordan when it was in flood stage validated Joshua's role as the new leader (Joshua 3). The conquest of Jericho was offset in part by a temporary reversal at Ai (Joshua 7:3-5), the second city to be conquered. The victories continued in the central cities of Canaan (including the miracle of the long day as given in Joshua 10), southern Canaan, and then against the northern coalition. These primary battles consumed several years, ending in approximately 1400 B.C. The land was divided among the remaining nine and one-half tribes. Cities were assigned for the Levites, with six of the cities designated as cities of refuge (Joshua 20).

Each of the last two chapters of the book of Joshua depicts national gatherings for covenant renewal. It is the second such event that is the background for today's lesson. There are no chronological references for these events. They are often assumed to be as early as 1390 B.C. but probably are later.

Assembly (Joshua 24:1)

1. In what representative way did Joshua summon all the tribes of Israel to Shechem? (v. 1)

Joshua was a person whose righteousness had a positive impact on the nation of Israel. The Israelites, who had settled Canaan, needed the challenge that Joshua wanted to give them as his leadership career was coming to an end.

Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem. Not everyone could make the trip to Shechem. This convocation was set up for representatives of the various tribes to attend. They included elders, heads (subordinate leaders), judges, and officers (officials). These people would return home and report what happened to their people. They could also be involved in making necessary charges.

2. How do we know that the assembly was both political and sacred?

We need to keep in mind that they came together not only to meet Joshua, but more importantly, to present themselves before God. This was not merely a political gathering; it was a sacred assembly. When Joshua called the leaders and all the people of Israel (in this case representatives) together to hear what God had to say, they knew it was something crucial. It was often a time of blessing or punishment.

Admonition (Joshua 24:14-20)

3. What three things did Joshua ask Israel to do (Josh. 24:14)?

At the beginning of Joshua's speech, he reminded Israel about what God has done for them from the time of Abraham to settling of Canaan. Joshua instructed Israel to do three things. First, they needed to fear the Lord. This means that they were to give God reverence

Next, they needed to serve the Lord in sincerity and in truth. This means that they should serve the Lord in a genuine and honest way.

Finally, they needed to put away the idols that represent the gods that their ancestors served "on the other side of the flood, and Egypt."

4. What did Joshua mean by "the other side of the flood"?

It is very doubtful that the flood Joshua mentions referred to the destruction of the world in Noah's time. It more likely referred to the Euphrates River. The land beyond it, Mesopotamia, was the original home of Abraham.

5. What were three sources of the idols retained by the Israelites?

Joshua challenges the Israelites to make a choice of which god they will serve. They will either serve the Lord or they will serve their idols. Apparently, some of the Israelites brought idols from Mesopotamia and Egypt and hid them among themselves. They also had idols representing the gods of the Amorites, among

whom they dwelled in Canaan. Unwilling to get rid of all the pagan idols, they fell prey to their false religions, beliefs, and practices.

6. What did Joshua declare regarding himself and his household?

Joshua makes a bold statement in verse 15, "but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD." Some might wonder how Joshua dared to speak out not only for himself but also for his whole household. During that patriarchal period, it was not unusual for a man to include all his family members and servants in the statements he made. We know that devotion to God is an individual matter, but a united family can have a joint testimony.

We should strive to be as bold as Joshua. No matter what, we should let people know that we will serve the Lord no matter what. Men should lead their families to serve the Lord wholeheartedly, and then they can also say that their house will serve the Lord as well.

7. Were the Israelites grateful for God's care for them?

The assembled delegates at Shechem appeared to be shaken by Joshua's remarks and might have been somewhat resentful. They felt that they had shown gratitude to the Lord for bringing them and their fathers out of the land of Egypt, performing miracles in their sight, and preserving them while they passed through hostile pagan people's territories. They appreciated the divine care they had received.

Jesus reminds us that if we love Him, then we should keep his commandments (John 14:15). The Israelites should have gotten rid of their idols and serve the Lord wholeheartedly. Sometimes, it is not easy to break old habits. Some of the Israelites held on to their idols for their insurance policy. Those people would try to please all their gods, including the Lord, to ensure that they would be blessed. However, God does not work that way. He wants us to put Him as the only God of our lives. There is no room for any idol. Remember that all Christians are a work in progress, but if we love the Lord, then we will strive to be guided by his Holy Spirit and live the Christian lifestyle.

Agreement (Joshua 24:21-24)

8. Why did the people say they would serve the Lord? (v. 21)

Clearly, the leaders did not want God's wrath on themselves and their people back home, and they had no intention on doing so. They repeated their allegiance to Yahweh. Yahweh would be their only deity. It was rare for a nation to serve just one deity. The Gentile world was polytheistic, meaning that they served many gods. The Israelites' stance set them apart from the Gentiles in the ancient world.

9. How did Joshua respond when the leaders first declared that they would serve the Lord? (v. 19)

Joshua tells the people that committing to serving the Lord was something that was major. It was important that the Israelites serve the Lord wholeheartedly. There was no room for half-hearted service.

God's care for them continued when they entered Canaan and had to fight the Amorites living there. They failed to mention that they had not fully obeyed God's command to be more thorough in ridding the land of those who had polluted it with their evil ways.

Did Joshua think that the leaders were too quick in saying that they would serve the Lord? The Israelites did not act immediately to rid themselves of their idols, so it's possible that Joshua thought that the people still retained the misguided notion that Yahweh was willing to be but one of a host of gods they could serve?

There is no way a person can serve God and other gods at the same time (v. 14-15). God stands above all else. He is exclusive and unique. He is different not just in degree but also in kind. Joshua warned the Israelites that they would not be able to serve God because of their polytheistic ways. He does not share His glory with other so-called gods, and people who view Him in the wrong way have no hope of forgiveness of their sins.

10. What two things did Joshua urge the repentant Israelites to do? (v. 23)

Joshua told the people to do two things. First they were to put away their idols which they had among themselves and they were to incline their hearts unto the Yahweh. In each person, there is a spiritual vacuum that needs to be filled. God designed this vacuum so that only He can fill it. If the vacuum is not filled with God then a person will fill it with something, whether it is another god, Satan, or something physical or emotional. Students of human nature often agree that there is a need in every human heart for acceptance and devotion to a power above and beyond what the earth has to offer. Theologians call this the quest for God residing in people's hearts.

Following the Lord requires more than mere words of commitment. Joshua himself had seen how a previous generation had enthusiastically declared their allegiance to God, but then had broken God's covenant with them. He wanted to be sure his people were genuinely devoted to following the Lord, and he was convinced.

Conclusion -- Most Favored Nation Status

Until 1998 the phrase *Most Favored Nation Status* was used to designate nations that received equal treatment by the U.S. in trading relations. The term was discontinued because most nations were in this category, and it seemed deceptive. The newer term is *Normal Trade Relations*. The nation of Israel, however, definitely was a nation with a "most favored" status before God. Yet, as has been expressed many times, *there is peril in privilege*.

The teaching of the New Testament is similar. The individual who becomes a member of the body of Christ enjoys the privileges of sins forgiven, the gift of the Holy Spirit, and the promise of Heaven. Yet Hebrews 6:4-6 warns about those who have enjoyed the privileges of the gospel and then fall away. *There is peril in privilege*.

Prayer

Our God in Heaven, we resolve to study Your Word in order to understand better our obligations to You and to others. In Jesus' name, amen.

Thought to Remember

To serve the Lord is costly.
Not to serve Him costs even more.

Anticipating Next Week's Lesson

In our next lesson we will explore how God sent godly leaders to Israel to turn them back to God when they disobeyed Him.

Lesson Summarized By

Montario Fletcher, montario@jesusisall.com