

JOSHUA

Lesson 26 - Chapter 24 Continued

As we continue in this final chapter of the book of Joshua, we'll need yet another lesson beyond this one to explore more of the great God-principles present in it. We ended last week with a rather long discussion about the ancient mindset as concerned gods in general and especially the Canaanite gods. This subject might (on the surface) not seem particularly relevant for the modern Believer, but the reality is that from beginning to end the Bible deals with false gods and idolatry, which is the worship of these gods of the pagans. We also find that despite the active presence of YHWH Israel constantly flirted with these gods, at times giving up worship of Him altogether in favor of these worthless fantasies. But more typically Israel simply incorporated some of the pagan gods and the Canaanites' worship customs with their own scripturally ordained practices as set down in the Law of Moses. Such a problem among God's people is hardly a thing of the past. Most Christian leaders still, today, feel the need to admonish their flocks to steer clear of idolatry (usually meaning a predisposition to behave as the unbelieving world behaves and valuing what the ungodly values). But I doubt we really understand the true nature of idolatry.

Therefore I would like to begin today's lesson with another aspect about what the general beliefs were in ancient and biblical times concerning how the sphere of the gods operated and how humans interacted with them. And the reason I harp on this matter is that the writers of the Bible had this in mind when they wrote, so unless we know what their mental picture was we'd miss the impact of their words.

In the 21st century Western world we tend to compartmentalize religion in our lives. We tend to see our religion (faith) as but one aspect of our lives, and as not terribly unlike exercise, or our favorite social activity, or (in most cases) our jobs. We have a place and a purpose and a time in our lives for each of these activities and we consciously attempt to keep them separate from one another; our jobs should not affect our family relationships; our hobbies should not affect our social activities, and our religion should have only to do with strictly religious activities under limited circumstances. Therefore the god of our jobs is our boss and our paycheck, the god of our social activity is pleasure and leisure, the god of our exercise is our physical body, and these do not necessarily have a tie to the god of our religion. Naturally I'm generalizing and not every last person thinks that way; but our system of government, education and Western culture do indeed strive for this philosophy of life.

This kind of compartmental thinking was unknown during any portion of the bible era, from Creation to Christ. The over arching umbrella of life for those people was the god or gods they worshipped because they affected every part of your being. The community and nation you

were a member of were identified in large part by which gods were served. A culture unified itself around their set of common gods. So to serve a god meant that virtually every detail of your life and your neighbors' life revolved around pleasing or appeasing that deity and his friends. If you ever tried to pull away, your family and friends were sure to try to keep you attached.

As we've discussed on so many occasions these gods observed national borders. So when you ventured out of your country and into another nation the power of your god was diminished or not present at all. Further if you wanted to communicate with your gods to ask for their help or for them to do all they were capable of doing for you, you took them along with you in the form of carved wooden and stone images. Lose your god image and you were really in trouble.

What I want for you all to keep at the forefront of your minds as we continue in Joshua 24 is that it is BECAUSE the Hebrews continued to think exactly as their Canaanite neighbors and enemies thought concerning the world of the gods, that the emphasis of this story is on idolatry and the need to abandon the practices and religious customs that were embedded in Israelite psyche. Because to hang onto these things in light of all that the Lord God had done for them and taught them was rebellion of the highest order and foolishness beyond measure with the most painful of consequences looming.

Let's re-read a large portion of this magnificent theological treatise that is the 24th chapter of Joshua.

RE-READ JOSHUA 24:6-end

The location of Shechem for this covenant renewal ceremony is so very appropriate for several reasons. First is that Shechem is where God promised Abraham that THIS was the land He would give to his descendants, and now Joshua is a leading a ceremony that essentially marks the fulfillment of that promise and what better place than the exact same spot where it all began.

Second, this proves something that no ancient person would ever have argued against, but most of the Western world today would declare as a myth: that history is circular. The bible explains that history must be circular because the universe operates in never changing patterns. In our most advanced societies we have come to the conclusion that we are evolution driven, not pattern driven, and therefore history is a straight line instead of circular. What happened yesterday might lead to tomorrow, but there is no repeatable pattern. A saying I remember my father using on me when I was a young man was that the definition of insanity is believing that if you keep doing the same things the same way you'll eventually get different results. And of course it was his way of telling me that until I changed my ways I could count on the same predicaments and problems to keep happening that resulted from my insistence on repeating the same bad decisions.

My father's saying would be challenged and dismissed by modern scientists and social engineers. They say that indeed no matter how poor the results may have been in past eras

that we CAN do what the ancients did (or even those of merely a previous generation) but with different and better results. And this is usually thought to be due to our advanced intelligence and technology. We are told that only the unenlightened look to the past for answers; that a progressive people should look forward with no constraints.

Joshua recognized that Israel's history had come full circle and so he brought the people to Shechem to ceremonially reenact what the namesake and founder of Israel (Jacob called Israel) did at this same exact location 500 or more years earlier: he ordered the members of his family to bury their idols, to rid themselves of all their gods.

Jacob had returned to Canaan after more than 2 decades in Mesopotamia where he lived with his uncle Laban. In Mesopotamia (generally the area of modern day Iraq) Jacob married both of Laban's daughters and acquired some concubines, and so had developed a substantial family of his own. Upon leaving the area Rachael pilfered her father's idols and brought them with her to Canaan; but other family members would not have left without their idols either. As Jacob's family grew he apparently tolerated their desire to hang on to their familiar gods. But after a calamitous event when his daughter, Dinah, was raped by the King of Shechem's son; and afterward Levi and Simeon led their brothers on a raid of revenge upon the city of Shechem that resulted in every last adult male being slaughtered, Jacob realized that drastic change was necessary. Thus we read this excerpt in Genesis 35:

CJB Genesis 35:1 God said to Ya'akov, "Get up, go up to Beit-El and live there, and make there an altar to God, who appeared to you when you fled 'Esav your brother." 2 Then Ya'akov said to his household and all the others with him, "Get rid of the foreign gods that you have with you, purify yourselves, and put on fresh clothes. 3 We're going to move on and go up to Beit-El. There I will build an altar to God, who answered me when I was in such distress and stayed with me wherever I went." 4 They gave Ya'akov all the foreign gods in their possession and the earrings they were wearing, and Ya'akov buried them under the pistachio tree near Sh'khem. 5 While they were traveling, a terror from God fell upon the cities around them, so that none of them pursued the sons of Ya'akov.

We can understand the need to bury the god images but why did Jacob's family have to give up their earrings as well? Because it was usual for jewelry to be fashioned using symbols of the attributes of the various gods. Did they worship their earrings? No. But nonetheless they represented something from their past that needed to be left behind, and it was definitely not pleasing to El Shaddai, so they had to go.

Now, 5 centuries later, we read in Joshua 24:14:

CJB Joshua 24:14 "Therefore fear ADONAI, and serve him truly and sincerely. Put away the gods your ancestors served beyond the [Euphrates]River and in Egypt, and serve ADONAI!

So there at the same traditional spot that Jacob buried the false gods of his past in order to move on to a new life in YHWH, so Joshua ordered all Israel to put away (bury) whatever

vestige of false gods that remained among them so that they would follow only the God of Israel. Notice the description of the gods that were to be put away; it was “the gods of your ancestors” from beyond the Euphrates (in Mesopotamia). Israel was still dallying in the same pantheon of gods that Jacob permitted his household to transport from Mesopotamia so many centuries earlier. Some things that we choose to do have lasting effects and unintended consequences that we could hardly imagine.

The first 13 verses of chapter 24 recount God’s faithfulness to Israel in the form of recounting their salvation history. That’s a term (salvation history) that I’ve used in past lessons and you’ll continue to hear where ever God leads us in studying His Word, because redemption (salvation) is the underlying theme of the entire Bible. Sometimes we forget that salvation did indeed have a long history. For too many Christians all we know (or want to know) of salvation history is Jesus; but He was the culmination, the fulfillment, of a certain portion of that history, the part that involved atonement for sins. Salvation history in it’s broadest sense goes back to Adam, but in a more specific sense it traces back to Abraham with the Lord establishing a specific line of people to carry out this redemptive plan: the Hebrews. But never forget that the salvation process is anything but completed. We have a long way to go as reflected in what we commonly call End-Times prophecies and then the 2nd coming, and later still the establishment of the Millennial Kingdom and ultimately a new earth.

The reason that the Lord (through Joshua) picked this moment to summarize Israel’s past is that Israel’s identity was all wrapped up in their history with God. But this review was also setting up a scenario that is not all that happy, and one that we should pay close attention to; it is that a people who has identified itself to the God of Israel, has benefited by that relationship, and has been redeemed by this merciful God have obligations to Him. And if they do not meet those obligations there can be destructive consequences. We’ll talk a little more about that shortly.

But first, look at verses 9 and 10: it remembers the story of the King of Moab who hired a prophet named Bil’am to curse Israel. And the reason for this action by the King, of course, was that Israel was coming to take the King’s land. There is a significant theological principle contained in these two short verses that I would be remiss to overlook. We don’t have time to read the story of Balak and Bil’am as it spans 3 chapters in Numbers 22-24 (you can go review it on your own). But the gist of it is that Bil’am is a gentile prophet who does have power. He appears to be aware of Yehoveh, but is definitely not a prophet of Yehoveh. The King of Moab summons Bil’am to come and curse Israel for him, and Bil’am agrees provided he’s paid handsomely. However on his journey to Moab He encounters God who tells him that he is NOT to curse Israel on behalf of the King, but rather is to issue them a blessing.

The God-principle in this story is this: unlike the pagan prophets who manipulated their gods on behalf of men, the true prophet simply takes orders from God and carries them out. God is unimpressed with the wants of prophets and cannot be boxed in. God does not listen and obey prophets; He directs their actions and words. The thing to understand is that Bil’am was no charlatan; he did have power, and did have the authority to curse. Where did that power come from? The god he worshipped and who lent him power and authority was the same one as all false gods, Satan. But the lesson we see from this is that Satan can do nothing that the Lord

God doesn't allow, and therefore neither can Satan's prophets. In fact as is a Christian saying that what men might mean for evil, the Lord can use for good, the same is reflected in the Balak and Bil'am incident. Satan can intend to curse, but the Lord can turn it to blessing.

Another important principle that did not fully escape Israel (nor did it fully internalize in them) is that YHWH is God over everyone and everything. No god or their prophet can stand up to Him, nor does the God of Israel find Himself bound by geographical or political or national boundary lines.

So after eloquently reminding Israel of even more recent history (the crossing of the Jordan and conquering of Canaan), Joshua now presents this conclusion: it is self evident that your proper response (people of Israel) is to fear Yehoveh and serve him faithfully. After forcefully stating that conclusion he puts this question before Israel in verse 15: if you **don't want** to serve the God of Israel, then whom WILL you serve? Will it be the gods that Father Abraham's ancestors served? Will it be the gods that the Amorites serve (that is, the god system that is currently most prevalent in Canaan and is all around you)? You see, even though it may not seem so, every human (even atheists) serves someone or some thing. It is only a matter of to whom do we give our service and allegiance. When Israel gained their independence from Egypt (and Egypt's gods), they moved on to dependence on Yehoveh. For those who say there is no god, they are actually serving the Evil One and he is fully their master. But they are so deceived they honestly believe they are serving only themselves. Since Atheism is only about a 300-year-old concept, then to the ancient mind it was never a matter of whether or not to serve a god; it was only, which one? And thus the people of Israel understood Joshua's question (at least they thought they did). But as we'll soon see this matter was not so simple; it had a depth and a hook to it that the people missed and Joshua knew they were missing it, thus we come upon an odd conversation between Joshua and the people's representatives.

Here is a key to understanding the depth of this question about what gods Israel will serve that Joshua put before the people: it was in the context of the Hebrews and/or their parents personally seeing and experiencing the mighty works of Yehoveh. It was in the context of the Hebrews KNOWING the God of Israel. But even more it was in the context of their already being REDEEMED by the God of Israel. None of this was theoretical or invisible. They had already been rescued, redeemed, seen their enemies defeated and given rest in their own land. It has already happened; they were currently in the midst of God's favor. If we were to draw a direct parallel of their situation to modern times, it would be to Believers (those who have been saved) who are being addressed by Joshua; for we have experienced God, we know God, and we are redeemed (saved) by God. So doesn't it seem strange that the already redeemed people (the Israelites) who have been walking with the Lord in His very presence for several years, are NOW being asked to choose which god they will serve?

Brothers and sisters in Messiah, this is a question that you and I are faced with every morning we awaken. Our freedom is so complete that the God of Universe gives us the liberty to go and serve another god or person or thing any time we choose. It's not His will for us to do so, but it is His character that He will hold none of us against our free will. It ought to frighten us to our core that the possibility still exists within us as Believers that we CAN choose to turn our backs on the Lord and serve another, assuredly with devastating consequences. Joshua says, follow

my example: "As for me and my house we will follow the Lord".

Now if this same question were asked by a leader standing before his synagogue or church congregation (if I presented this question to you) without doubt the response would be identical to what we read that the Israelites said in verse 16: ".....far be it from us that we would abandon Adonai to serve other gods...." Oh, they say, how could you ever contemplate that our answer would be anything else but that we agree that Yehoveh has saved us and we will serve Him? But then in verse 19 we get a surprising response from Joshua that has befuddled many scholars over the centuries, and sent them scurrying for answers; Joshua says to Israel, " You can't serve Adonai...." And this is because He is a holy God and He is a jealous God, and He will NOT forgive your sins against Him. He goes on in the next verse to say that abandoning the worship of Yehoveh will mean that God will do harm (evil in some translations) to His people and that He will destroy them.

I just don't think we can grasp that Joshua's statement is one of the most shocking in the entire Old Testament. He is essentially saying that the people who are vowing to honor YHWH (this is a covenant renewal ceremony after all, so what the people are doing is making a vow to reaffirm the Torah) are not capable of doing what they are saying they'll do! So after Joshua poses the question of which god they will serve, and he receives the answer from the people that we would all hope and expect we'd hear, Joshua rejects it. Why?

Well scholars have given several possible solutions to this dilemma, but frankly most of them don't pass muster because as often happens in modern biblical scholarship the present circumstances and actual context as written in the Scriptures is ignored in favor of some philosophical answer; or (has become popular recently) that this verse was a late insertion by some unknown editor and thus it should simply be discarded in the first place.

Rather the whole matter of this chapter (as I stated at the beginning of our study) is that of the danger to Israel of worshipping other gods. Christianity in particular has taken on the peculiar habit of taking certain warning statements in the Bible (primarily the New Testament of course) as purely rhetorical; that is, there are statements that sound ominous to our relationship with the Lord but in reality (we're told) the situation can't actually happen. By the way I totally reject this disrespectful treatment of God's Word as though at times what we read in its passages is tantamount to little more than an exasperated parent making hollow threats to a troublesome child and then later recanting it all as but an emotional outburst.

Joshua's statement that Israel is not equipped to worship God is **not** rhetorical; in fact it is so deep and full of truth and light that I'm not sure I can find the words, but I'll try. First, know that Joshua was NOT addressing a future possibility of idolatry within Israel; he was addressing a present reality. Some of Israel was indeed practicing idolatry even if they didn't think they were or they simply publicly denied it in the emotion of the moment and to express unity. Even though the theology taught by the priests of Israel left no doubt that service to other gods was just not a possibility for Israel, in reality it was occurring. The people held idols, they gave food to the idols, they presented gifts and prayers to their idols, and at times they buried them. The people indeed had no intention of giving up their worship of Yehoveh as they so forcefully said in their response to Joshua's question; but neither did they say that they would NOT ALSO

simultaneously serve other gods as well as serve Yehoveh. They readily acknowledged that it indeed was YHWH that rescued them from Pharaoh and who led them through the Wilderness and provided for them; it was YHWH who defeated their enemies and gave them a land of their own. BUT.....vowing NOT to abandon Yehoveh and instead serving other gods is not at all the same thing as vowing to completely abandon other gods and serve ONLY YHWH. And Joshua detected this in their response. Why did they respond that way? Were they just being clever or hedging their bets? Not at all. Refer back to last week's lesson and the early part of this one; the way the sphere of gods worked in their minds in no way required them to make one god mutually exclusive over other gods. All this talk of worshipping Yehoveh, and being careful NOT to abandon Him, in no way meant to them that thus they could not ALSO deal with the gods of fertility, rain, storms, etc. To do otherwise would seem absurd.

Rather the people are hearing what they want to hear. They see Yehoveh as the one who has obligations. They see their God as required to protect them and provide for them, because that is the way the god system of all the Mystery Babylon religions operated. And so in proper response they would, in turn, serve Yehoveh.....but NOT exclusively.

Joshua however is seeking something much deeper from Israel. He wants their motivation to serve God to come not from obligation but from love. He wants them to base their worship of Him on WHO He is: His nature, His attributes, and His characteristics. His nature was explained in earlier verses in the retelling of Israel's salvation history. And Joshua is saying that for them to understand Yehoveh in the same context as they have understood all the other gods makes the proper worship of Him as impossible. And the first reason this is impossible is because God is holy.

The thing about holiness is that it is BOTH a saving and a destroying attribute of God. It is a unique characteristic of deities but especially so of Yehoveh. The holiness of the Lord ought to so impress His followers that they (we) want to imitate it; in fact that is His expectation of us. But even more the true worshipper of God recognizes that Yehoveh's holiness is so great and awesome and transcendent that we cannot possibly meet all the demands and requirements of such a spiritual being. On the other hand the Lord God is personally insulted and offended by those who fail to be impressed by His holiness and do not at least attempt in a sincere way, and according to His laws and commands, to meet His expectations of them. Thus, reasons, Joshua, such a man cannot serve God.

The second reason that Joshua says the people of Israel cannot serve God is that God is jealous. Now to the ears of the Israelites their understanding of jealousy did not match with the spiritual reality of God's kind of jealousy. In the god system of the era the gods were jealous of one another. The gods were constantly battling amongst themselves for preeminence or over who would possess and mate with certain goddesses, or over who would control which elements of nature and to what extent. The Lord God on the other hand was jealous of the affections of His PEOPLE, those who chose to worship Him. God did NOT see these silly gods as rivals (for as we all know they were but figments of men's evil imaginations in the first place), so He turned his indignation not against non-existent other gods but against those followers who were unfaithful to Him. He has given undivided love and attention to Israel and He demands that in return; if those who call themselves by His Name do otherwise He will

punish them in hopes they will see the light. But if they do not see the light, then they will be destroyed as certainly as those who had never known Him.

And thus we have presented in this verse the cosmic dilemma that faces all human kind: we are simply not able, of ourselves, to serve a God who demands that we serve Him. Our minds are too perverted with the ways of the world, our souls are too unclean to be in His presence, and our ears are closed to His voice. The level of our expected service to Him must be perfect because He is so perfect. His expectations for His people are higher than they can ever hope to meet. His expectations and the consequences for failing to meet those expectations are what we call God's Justice. That divine system of justice is spelled out in the Torah; most specifically it is detailed in that section of Torah called The Law. There we find that the Lord metes out rewards (that we call blessings) for meeting His demands, and punishments (that we call curses) when we fail.

It is also Yehoveh's nature to not sit idly by as His people pursue the favor of other gods. It was the norm (within the understood god system that Israel went by) that gods who lost the devotion of a worshipper would simply wait for that errant worshipper to return. Not so the God of Israel; Yehoveh will go out and discipline His own when they stray in order that they come back to Him.

Verse 20 is ominous for Israel of Joshua's era, all following era's, and naturally for all who call on the Lord for our redemption. It says that if we ignore this dire warning and go seeking after gods we do not know then the end result is destruction. As I said earlier in defining holiness: it is both a saving and a destroying power. The first half of Joshua 24 went about reviewing the saving attribute of God's holiness as it detailed how the Lord rescued and redeemed and lovingly cared for Israel (thus I describe it as Israel's salvation history). The short section of Joshua 24 that we're in right now is a reminder of that other attribute of God's holiness that destroys. It destroys those who know God but refuse to serve Him wholeheartedly. God says He will reverse salvation history if Israel gives its affections to other gods, because their salvation only has meaning in the context of full devotion to Him and Him alone. The Prophets of old warned over and over on this subject, Israel did not sufficiently heed those warnings, and we know the result: destruction and exile.

We'll finish up the book of Joshua next week.