

# Undivided

Joshua 24:14-25

**14** “Therefore, fear the LORD and worship Him in sincerity and truth. Get rid of the gods your fathers worshiped beyond the Euphrates River and in Egypt, and worship Yahweh.

**15** But if it doesn’t please you to worship Yahweh, choose for yourselves today the one you will worship: the gods your fathers worshiped beyond the Euphrates River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living. As for me and my family, we will worship Yahweh.” **16**

The people replied, “We will certainly not abandon the LORD to worship other gods! **17** For the LORD our God brought us and our fathers out of the land of Egypt, out of the place of slavery, and performed these great signs before our eyes. He also protected us all along the way we went and among all the peoples whose lands we traveled through. **18** The LORD drove out before us all the peoples, including the Amorites who lived in the land. We too will worship the LORD, because He is our God.” **19** But Joshua told the people, “You will not be able to worship Yahweh, because He is a holy God. He is a jealous God; He will not remove your transgressions and sins. **20** If you abandon the LORD and worship foreign gods, He will turn against you, harm you, and completely destroy you, after He has been good to you.”

**21** “No!” the people answered Joshua. “We will worship the LORD.” **22** Joshua then told the people, “You are witnesses against yourselves that you yourselves have chosen to worship Yahweh.” “We are witnesses,” they said. **23** “Then get rid of the foreign gods that are among you and offer your hearts to the LORD, the God of Israel.” **24** So the people said to Joshua, “We will worship the LORD our God and obey Him.” **25** On that day Joshua made a covenant for the people at Shechem and established a statute and ordinance for them.



# Exploration

Can you recall a time when you started a project and halfway through, wished you hadn't? Perhaps you tried to renovate your house only to realize that you underestimated the time and money it would take to finish. Or maybe you joined a club or team that demanded more time than you anticipated. Anything worth doing requires commitment—if we hope to finish, we must count the cost and be fully devoted to seeing things through. This is why Jesus called all who wished to be His disciples to take up their crosses and follow Him (Matt. 16:24). Jesus wanted His disciples to be crystal clear on the sacrifice, commitment, and devotion that would be required to be His disciples. In today's session we will look at Joshua's final charge to the people of Israel in which he makes clear that there is no middle ground when it comes to following the one true God. We are either all in, or we are out. Help students to see that we are talking about something far more important than a personal project or a sports team—we are talking about our commitment to the God who made us. Challenge students to count the cost of following Jesus. Following Christ is costly, but the cost is always worth it.

## CONTEXT (JOSH. 23:1–24:33)

Joshua 23 records Joshua's farewell address while chapter 24 records a renewal, led by Joshua, of the covenant between Israel and God. Joshua had lived for many years in the promised land (23:1). But the aging Joshua probably knew he would soon die. He "summoned all Israel" (23:2) and said to them: "I am now going the way of all the earth" (23:14), an indication he recognized his death was near.

Joshua addressed more than his pending death. He reminded the Israelites of the miracle of the conquest. With each victory, they had witnessed the presence, activity, and blessings of God. Joshua told the Hebrews that, because of the presence of the Lord, a single Hebrew soldier routed a thousand enemy soldiers (23:10).

Joshua offered more than a history lesson; he encouraged the Israelites to continue to be strong and to obey the Lord's commands. He directed them not to deviate ("to the right or left," 23:6) from God's Law. He also called the Israelites to faithfulness in their worship of the Lord.

Joshua offered more than an inspiring oration; he offered a word of warning. If the Israelites proved to be unfaithful to the Lord, God's anger would burn against them. The gains of the conquest could quickly disappear. In disobedience, the Hebrews could no longer expect the Lord to bless and protect them.

In his final act (recorded in chap. 24), Joshua gathered the Israelites at Shechem and renewed the covenant between them and the Lord. His farewell speech and covenant renewal complete, Joshua died at the age of 110. No greater accomplishment can be attributed to a follower of the Lord than "Israel worshiped Yahweh throughout Joshua's lifetime" (24:31).



# Conversation

Begin by discussing and allowing for several students to share their responses to the following quick response questions.

› **Share about a time when your actions did not match your words. What happened?**

› **Why do we sometimes talk a big game, but fail to follow through? What does that say about us?**

None of us intentionally choose to flake on important commitments or let our friends down in their time of need. This is because we all have a tendency to think more highly of ourselves than we ought (Rom. 12:3). If you have spent much time in church, you have experienced this. When we are asked to give or serve in specific ways, we know the right answer, we know that we ought to do these things. However, it is when we are called upon to follow through with our commitment to do these things that the true quality of our faith and character shows forth. In Joshua 24, as the book draws to a close and Joshua delivers his final charge to the people of Israel, he challenges them to demonstrate their faith with action. They were saying all the right things, so Joshua speaks rather bluntly to them. He wants to make clear that all their verbal commitments don't mean a whole lot if they are not followed up with obedience.

## JOSHUA 24:14-15

Joshua led Israel in the conquest of Canaan for many years. Realizing he was growing old (23:1-2), he called all the Israelites to meet with him. It was time to prepare the nation for his death and the consequent change of leadership (24:1). Speaking for God as a prophet, Joshua retold the history of God's mighty acts on their behalf (vv. 2-13), and then challenged Israel to remain faithful to God who had brought them this far.

› **What does it mean to "fear the Lord"? According to verse 15, what does that involve? What might that look like for you in your context?**

› **Why do you think Joshua opened his challenge to the Israelites with this bold plea to choose sides? What risks did he assume by making such a bold declaration?**

To "fear the Lord" does not mean to be terrified of Him, though there is an element of that (see Isa. 6:5; Luke 5:8) but to stand in reverential awe of Him. Those who truly fear God have an active awareness of His unmatched power, glory, sovereignty, and holiness. They may not know these things perfectly about God, no one does, but they are aware of God's character to such degree that it affects their thoughts and actions. Joshua was one such man. He knew the consequences of drawing a line in the sand and demanding that Israel devote themselves completely to God and yet he boldly demanded that Israel devote themselves wholly and completely to the one true God.



## JOSHUA 24:14-15

Joshua set the example, saying: As for me and my family, we will worship Yahweh. He knew the effect that an example could have and gave an example of an individual and a family dedicated to the Lord.

## JOSHUA 24:16-18

The Lord also gave the Israelites favor among all the peoples whose land they traveled through.



# Conversation

While students are not verbally being asked to proclaim their exclusive devotion to Christ, they are being asked this question indirectly all the time. They are being challenged to devote themselves to the gods of popularity, sports, and acceptance. One of the most dangerous things we can do spiritually is to assume that we are fine. Challenge students to honestly wrestle with the question of who it is that they are really serving with their hearts and lives. The stakes are too high not to seriously and carefully consider where our allegiance lies.

## JOSHUA 24:16-18

Joshua demonstrated bold, effective leadership by serving as a model for the people. He was able to boldly call the Israelites to follow the Lord, in part because he had set a precedent of this in his own life. His walk matched his talk, so he called on the Israelites to follow his example. In verses 16-18, the Israelites responded to Joshua's challenge, a challenge Joshua refused to let them take lightly.

› **On what basis did the Israelites make their decision to follow, worship, and serve the Lord exclusively (vv. 17-18)?**

› **How did Joshua's public stand influence the people's response? What is the difference between "telling" something and "showing" something?**

There is a rule in most news rooms about writing good news stories that people will want to read and it goes like this, "Show, don't tell." It is always more powerful and persuasive when we show something to be true rather than merely telling people that it is. For instance, it is one thing for a news reporter to claim that a particular person is guilty of murder, but it is far more persuasive to interview dozens of witnesses and cite DNA evidence. This is essentially what Paul did in his defense of the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15—he reminded his readers that there were over 500 eye witnesses of the resurrection, most of whom were still alive (1 Cor. 15:3-7).

In their response to Joshua's challenge to serve the Lord wholeheartedly and exclusively, the Israelites say all the right things. They rightly remember God's faithfulness and power in rescuing them from slavery in Egypt and establishing them in the promised land. However, their response is an example of telling without showing. Up to this point, the nation did not exactly have a great track record when it came to fervent, undivided devotion to God: when Moses was receiving the Ten Commandments from God, they were worshiping a golden calf (Ex. 32) and when they sent out twelve spies to scout the promised land, only two came back trusting the Lord's promise to give them the land (Num. 13). So while the Israelites rightly remembered God's faithfulness and promised to devote their hearts and lives fully to Him, Joshua's stinging response in the verses that follow should not surprise us. It is one thing to say all the right things about following Jesus, it is quite another to let our commitment to Christ transform our thoughts and actions on a daily basis.



# Leader Prep

The people recalled that the Lord drove out before us all the peoples, including the Amorites. The term Amorites seems to be a general term to designate the Canaanite population.

The people were grateful for God's provision and protection along their 40-year journey. The examples they remembered demonstrated God's faithfulness to them. Their reflection on His provision and protection motivated them to remain faithful to Him: We too will worship the Lord.

## JOSHUA 24:19-20

After the people pledged to worship and serve the Lord alone, Joshua's reply probably shocked them: "You will not be able to worship Yahweh." Joshua's words urged the people to sober reflection. He knew the Israelites had a history of making commitments they failed to keep. He reminded the people that the Lord is a holy God. Holy means set apart. God's people are to be holy because of God's holy nature: "Be holy because I, Yahweh your God, am holy" (Lev. 19:2).

God is also a jealous God. He does not share His children's allegiance with any other god. The temptation to worship and serve other gods would be strong for the Israelites, because those false gods made no demands on or had any expectations of the people.

With the words, He will not remove your transgressions and sins, Joshua was not communicating that the Lord would never forgive Israel's sins. God had described Himself as the One who forgives sin (see Ex. 34:7; 2 Chron. 7:14). Joshua was warning the Israelites to take their walk with God seriously.

God's expectations have not changed. Jesus said to the crowds that followed Him: "Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple. For which of you, wanting to build a tower, doesn't first sit down and calculate the cost to see if he has enough to complete it?" (Luke 14:27-28). Jesus stressed that individuals must understand the commitment—the cost—required to be His follower.

## JOSHUA 24:21-25

Again, the people voiced their intentions to be faithful to the Lord, insisting that they would not abandon the Lord. They reaffirmed their commitment: “We will worship the Lord.” Joshua pointed out that everyone heard their public commitment; therefore, they served as witnesses against one another. The people accepted this responsibility with “We are witnesses.”



The Israelites affirmation, “He is our God (v. 18),” reflected their total allegiance to the Lord. They would fully commit themselves to the One who had delivered them from Egypt, provided for them in the wilderness, and given them the promised land.

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# Conversation

## JOSHUA 24:19-25

Joshua again serves as a model of wise leadership in this encounter with the Israelites. Instead of quickly accepting their affirmation of exclusive commitment to God, he questioned the depth of their commitment. Like the Israelites, our faith will be tested. The good news about this testing is that God promises to use it to make us more like Christ (Jas. 1:3; 1 Pet. 1:3-9).

› **How did Joshua respond in verses 20-21 to the Israelites' claim that they would serve the Lord (see also v. 22)? Does his response surprise you? Why or why not?**

› **What did Joshua say would happen if the people turned their backs on God (v. 20)? Why did the Israelites need a reminder?**

The Israelites answered Joshua's challenge, to choose who they would serve (v. 15), correctly. They remember how God had miraculously delivered them out of Egypt and confidently declare their allegiance to Him (vv.16-18). Joshua's answer suggests, however, that he was afraid that their response might have been all talk. According to James, the demons know the right answers to who God is (Jas. 2:19), so knowing the answers to the questions we find in Scripture is insufficient. Joshua wanted them to consider whether they had really counted the cost of devoting themselves completely to God.

Joshua's point in verse 20 in telling the Israelites that they are "not able" to serve the Lord, was not to discourage them or claim that God is not forgiving. Instead, it seems that Joshua wanted them to be crystal clear on two things: (1) they could not follow God on their own, they needed the strength that only God can supply (Josh. 1:5, 9), and (2) God will not excuse those who persist in rejecting Him (v. 21).

› **Why did Joshua continue to question the Israelites after they declared their devotion to God? What does this tell us about him? About the severity of his challenge?**

› **Why must we be "all in" when it comes to following Jesus? What might that require of us (see Matt. 6:24)?**

We can't be on the fence about Jesus. In fact, He promises that those whose walk does not match their talk will be cast out of His presence one day (Matt. 7:23). In essence, Joshua was asking the Israelites a question all followers of Christ must face: "Do you love the Lord enough to give up your idols?" While it was impossible for the Israelites to fully keep their commitment to serve the Lord, it was not impossible for Jesus. The Father was and is pleased with Him and through faith in Him, His obedience becomes our obedience (2 Cor. 5:21). While Joshua's challenge may seem impossible, it is not impossible for those who lean on Christ.



# Leader Prep

Joshua's tone may have changed abruptly. He told them: "Then get rid of the foreign gods that are among you." Unfortunately, the disloyalty and unfaithfulness had already begun. From the time of the completed conquest to the present, some of the Israelites had already begun to worship and serve false gods. The Israelites themselves provided witness to the difficulty of being faithful to God (see v. 19).

Joshua instructed them: offer your hearts to the Lord. For the third and final time, the people committed themselves to the Lord and said “We will worship the Lord our God and obey Him.”

Based on the commitments of the Hebrews, Joshua made a covenant between them and God. God had established a covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Gen. 28:13). The Lord had further ratified that covenant at Mount Sinai with His people after He led them out of Egypt (Ex. 24:1-8). Now, at Shechem, this covenant solidified the relationship between God and Israel.

We can substitute the word *relationship* for the word *covenant* and get near the meaning. This covenant served as a reminder of the relationship between the people and the Lord. As the Lord had promised to be their God (see Lev. 26:12), the Hebrews must promise to be faithful to Him.

In addition to recording the covenant in a book, Joshua marked the momentous occasion with a large stone. This stone served as a witness to this generation as well as future generations, of the commitment the Hebrews made. While the Hebrews might change, the stone would not. The stone served both as a memorial of the covenant as well as a witness to remind the people of the consequences of breaking it.

All the events of Joshua 23–24 happened publicly. Joshua had summoned all Israel for his farewell address (chap. 23). He had gathered all the tribes of Israel at Shechem for the covenant renewal (chap. 24). The Hebrews had made a public declaration, and Joshua commemorated the occasion with a public marker.

Jesus calls us to take up our crosses and follow Him. Taking up the Christian cross, as well as attempting to be salt and light, cannot be done in a clandestine manner.



While it is true that nothing can “separate us from the love of Christ” (Rom. 8:35), that does not invalidate the fact that we need the warning of verse 21, a warning that is designed to wake us up to the critical nature of Joshua’s challenge. The commitment to God that Joshua calls for in verse 15 is not optional for us, therefore we can’t remain on the fence in our commitment to God and the mission He has given us.

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# Application

## CENTRAL TRUTH

*God requires undivided loyalty—you cannot serve both God and idols.*

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➤➤ **ITEM 3 (LEADER PACK)** Reference the **Joshua 24:15** pack item. Challenge students to explain how Joshua's challenge to the Israelites applies to them. Through our study, God is calling them to choose who they will serve, to identify the idols of their hearts and turn from them to Christ.

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## NOW WHAT?

- › **What are some common idols you and your peers may fall into worshiping (popularity, fear, acceptance, achievement, etc.)? Which are you most prone to?**
- › **Joshua, in essence, was challenging the Israelites to consider whether they loved the Lord enough to give up their idols. What idols might the Lord be calling you to part with?**
- › **What can we learn from Joshua's interactions with the people of Israel in terms of helping one another pursue Christ?**

Challenge students to refuse to merely say the right things about Jesus and instead demonstrate their faith through their lifestyles. When our friends make professions of faith or claim to have made strides in their walk with Christ, we should be happy for them (Rom. 12:15). Our excitement, however, should be tempered with the understanding that following Christ is costly (Matt. 16:24). Many people will make professions of faith that ultimately prove hollow by the outcome of their lives (Matt. 7:21-23). So when people around us claim to have trusted Christ for salvation or to have committed their life to His mission, it is not enough to be happy for them. We need to challenge each other to take our commitment to Christ seriously. God has given us the church to test our faith, to help us prioritize His kingdom and glory. Much like the Israelites needed Joshua's challenge to devote themselves fully to God, we need to raise the expectations we have for ourselves and the people around us in terms of what it means to follow Jesus.

- › **What are some practical ways we can support each other in following and worshiping Christ exclusively? How might we help one another live on mission?**



## PERSONAL CHALLENGE

Finish your group time with these thoughts and encourage students to memorize the verse listed for this session. Memorizing God's Word allows it to dwell in us and allows Him to speak through His Word in our times of need. Also encourage your group to take advantage of the Keep on Digging section in their Personal Study Guides and to take the truths of this section and apply them to their lives.

› **Dwell:** Have you embraced Joshua's challenge to serve the Lord alone? How can you know whether you have truly and sincerely embraced this challenge? According to Joshua, claiming we have embraced a life of exclusive devotion to God is not enough. We must demonstrate our faith with action. Set aside some time this week to take a personal inventory of your life, your priorities, desires, and focus. Where do you need to redirect your energy and focus to prioritize Christ? What is hindering you? Honestly wrestle with these questions and consider seeking out a brother or sister in Christ who will hold you accountable to strive for progress in these areas.

› **Memorize:** Joshua 24:15

› **Pray:** Thank God for sending Jesus to do what we could not do on our own—to live the fully devoted, righteous, mission-minded life that we have failed to live. Thank Him that His righteousness is credited to us through faith in Him such that we can live confidently for His kingdom and mission. Pray that He would help you to repent from those idols that are hindering you from loving Christ supremely and committing fully to the mission He has given you. Finally, pray that He would direct you in your efforts to commit fully to Him and to lovingly hold those around you to their commitment to do the same.

## KEEP ON DIGGING

Read, meditate on, and journal about Matthew 7:15-29. As you read, consider what kind of devotion Jesus desires His disciples to have to Him. List three takeaways that you will strive to apply to your life this week. Consider the areas of your life where your loyalties are divided. Record a prayer to God in your journal, asking Him to help you grow in your love to Him such that you would willingly part with your idols in order to focus on His glory, kingdom, and mission.



For an expository verse-by-verse sermon outline/discussion guide that complements this session with a study in Galatians, see [lifeway.com/ETBWIN17JJR](http://lifeway.com/ETBWIN17JJR). For **free** training, go to [MinistryGrid.com/web/ExploreTheBible](http://MinistryGrid.com/web/ExploreTheBible).