

# Immanuel Lutheran Mail Ministry



**Joshua 24:1-5, 13-15** *Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel. And they presented themselves before God. <sup>2</sup> And Joshua said to all the people, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'Long ago, your fathers lived beyond the Euphrates, Terah, the father of Abraham and of Nahor; and they served other gods. <sup>3</sup> Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan, and made his offspring many. I gave him Isaac. <sup>4</sup> And to Isaac I gave Jacob and Esau. And I gave Esau the hill country of Seir to possess, but Jacob and his children went down to Egypt. <sup>5</sup> And I sent Moses and Aaron, and I plagued Egypt with what I did in the midst of it, and afterward I brought you out. . . . I gave you a land on which you had not labored and cities that you had not built, and you dwell in them. You eat the fruit of vineyards and olive orchards that you did not plant.' <sup>14</sup> "Now therefore fear the LORD and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness. Put away the gods that your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. <sup>15</sup> And if it is evil in your eyes to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD."*

There were a series of commercials put out by DirecTV a few years back which were rather comical, perhaps you remember them. They revolved around the Settler family—a husband, wife, son and daughter who lived like 19<sup>th</sup> Century pioneers. They lived in a dusty, rundown shanty of a house, wearing drab homespun clothing, utilizing oil lanterns for light, eating graywater soup as they called it and other meager foods. The comedy of all this was that each commercial began with a street view of their little shack, dwarfed as it was on either side by nice, suburban, 21<sup>st</sup> century two-story homes. And the punchline of each commercial was one member of the family asking “pa” why they settled for cable when they could easily upgrade to DirecTV. And inevitably, the reply would be, “Because we’re Settlers, and that’s what we do.”

It’s an effective commercial for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century American, for whom settling-for-less has come to be seen as a cardinal sin. “Why would you settle for that old rust bucket of a car when you can buy a brand new one for zero money down and 0% interest for six months!?” “Why would you settle for that outdated 40-inch LED HDTV, when you can buy a brand new 75-inch LED 4K *Ultra* HDTV?!” Settling for less, that’s just not something many people seem all that interested in doing in our consumer economy. If only this type of “won’t settle for less than the best” attitude carried over to things that really mattered.

I’m talking about religion. I’m talking about faith. I’m talking about the God whom you serve. Sadly, that’s one area of life where most people seem to be content to settle for less. This was the heart of the issue when Joshua addressed the Israelites that day in our text, when he implored them, **“Choose this day whom you will serve.”** Any choice they would have made would have been settling for less. It would have meant choosing to give everything in order to gain nothing. That’s because there’s only one God who demands nothing and yet gives everything. The theme we’ll be considering today is:

## **Christians Don’t Settle For Less**

- I: The false, man-made gods are worthless
- II: The *true* God has made man worthy in Christ

Every person serves some god. This has been true since the dawn of creation. Adam and Eve served God as they tended to the Garden of Eden, but then they decided to serve the “god of self” instead. During the times of Old Testament Israel, such as during our Scripture reading, the Israelites again served the one, true Jehovah God. But eventually they would start serving the gods of the local peoples: Baal, Ashtoreth, the gods of the Amorites, and so on. Even still to this day, everyone is serving some god. It might be Buddha, it might be Allah, it might be the god of money, or the god of self-interest, or the god of consumerism, or the god of leisure. Certainly, there are many people in this day-and-age that consider themselves unaffiliated when it comes to religion, but when you get right down to it, everyone has a god. It’s whatever they hold most dear, the thing or activity or person who has become the primary motivation and focus of their life. That is the definition of a god.

Now, the difference between all of these so-called gods and the one true God is that none of these can offer anything to you. They demand or claim all your focus and effort, and they give you nothing in return. For instance, a few months ago I read an article about a certain Hindu holy man named Sadhu Amar Bharati. He’s considered a holy man because he’s forced himself into a life devoid of all pleasure in the spirit of his religion of Hinduism. And he’s done it in a rather peculiar way. For 45 years, this man has supposedly held his right arm straight up in the air. 45 years straight. In the 70’s, he had been employed at a bank, married to a woman, he had three children. And then in 1973, he decided to leave his job, leave his family, and spend the rest of his life with his arm straight up in the air as a sign of his devotion to Shiva, one of the multitude of gods of the Hindus. Talk about a wasted life. In his service to his god, he gave up not only his wife and children and job, but even the use of his right arm and any useful contributions he could have made to his family and to society. And it’s a tragic story, because, at the end of it all, what does he get in return? Nothing but death in hell. After all, Jesus said, ***“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”*** (John 14:6)

This is the nature of the gods of this world. **The false man-made gods are worthless.** You give your all and can get nothing back. And that was the implication of Joshua’s question that day. We can find it again starting in verse 14, ***“Now therefore fear the LORD and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness. Put away the gods that your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. And if it is evil in your eyes to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.”***

A little background on this time-period in Israel’s history. You likely recall the Exodus of the Children of Israel from Egypt. Through Moses, God had led the Children of Israel out of the house of bondage in Egypt, through the Red Sea, through the wilderness, up to the Promised Land of Canaan. But, once they arrived, the people started to doubt God and said that they wished they were still in Egypt. God condemned them to wandering the wilderness for 40 years until that entire generation of Israelites passed away. 40 years had gone by, and a new generation of Israelites entered into the Promised Land under the leadership of Joshua. And this was a faithful generation of Israel. In fact, it was perhaps the most faithful generation in Israel’s history. God had told them to drive out the inhabitants of the land, because He did not want them to be tempted to follow the gods of that land. And they listened. They marched around Jericho, the walls came tumbling down. They went and fought and for about 20 years drove out most of the peoples of the land, as God had commanded.

And now, here they are, gathered together at Shechem, and Joshua is giving what amounts to his final

address. He's 110 years old by this point, and he's about to die. So, he tells them again, ***"If it is evil in your eyes to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell."***

Remember the gods of their ancestors beyond the river? Particularly that golden calf god which they had molded for themselves and declared, ***"These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!"*** (Exodus 32:8) And shortly after that, that golden calf was ground up into powder and cast into the water and given to the people to drink. And within 40 years, that generation had passed away. They had wanted to serve a god that was worthless, that could give nothing in return.

So, Joshua asks, do you want to serve that god? Or would they choose the gods of the Amorites, Joshua suggests. Would they choose those gods who had been totally unable to do anything to stop the Israelites from driving their people out of the promised land of Canaan—would they choose them? He presents their options as a coinflip in which it doesn't matter how the coin lands. Either way, the people would have been settling for less. They would be settling for **false, man-made gods which were truly worthless** and could do nothing for them.

"Not me and my house," Joshua says. ***"As for me and my house, we will serve the LORD."*** What about you? Which God will you and your family serve? I'm quite certain, gathered in God's house as you are today, that you are ready to take up the cry of Joshua, ***"As for me and my house, we will serve the LORD."*** Or perhaps you might answer with the confession of Peter from our Gospel reading, ***"Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."*** (John 6:68) That's how the Israelites responded to Joshua's questioning. In the verses just after our text, the people respond: ***"Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods, . . . Therefore we also will serve the LORD, for he is our God."*** (Joshua 24:16,18b) Excellent response! Consider the matter settled, huh? But listen to Joshua's response. He says that actually, ***"You are not able to serve the LORD, for he is a holy God."*** (Joshua 24:19)

So, they say, "Joshua, we're totally on the same page here." They give him the right answer, and he shoots it down. And if that's surprising to you, consider his reason why. You cannot serve the Lord, for He is holy. In their self-righteousness, they had perhaps started to think that they would be able to serve God and live as His people. Those Ten Commandments that God had given them in the wilderness, they would be able to keep them—the First, ***"You shall have no other gods,"*** right on down through the tenth. And yet Joshua knew, that when it comes to serving a *holy* God, anything less than absolute perfection would simply not be enough. And sinners as they were, they would be unable to *truly* serve the Lord.

And the same reprimand may be said of you and me today. ***"You are not able to serve the LORD, for He is a holy God."*** He demands that you fear, love, and trust Him above everything else in your lives. And you don't. And I don't. No, the truth is, we try to serve the Lord at the same time that we try to serve many other gods. We want one foot in the camp with God, saying we trust You above all else, while at the same time our other foot is planted firmly in the camp of finances and job security and happiness. We entrust some things to the Lord, while we put most of our efforts in securing our own futures for ourselves. And this is not what it means to serve the Lord or to fear the Lord above all else.

No, we too are guilty of settling for **false, man-made gods which are worthless**. And Christians cannot afford to settle. But dear friends in Christ, while we often settle for that which does not last, for that which can do nothing for us, for that which is truly worthless, **God has made us worthy in Christ Jesus**. You see, the impetus is not on us choosing God, but rather on God choosing us.

That's the substance of Joshua's prelude to his questioning of the Israelites. He says, **"Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'Long ago, your fathers lived beyond the Euphrates, Terah, the father of Abraham and of Nahor; and they served other gods. Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan, and made his offspring many. I gave him Isaac. And to Isaac I gave Jacob and Esau. And I gave Esau the hill country of Seir to possess, but Jacob and his children went down to Egypt. And I sent Moses and Aaron, and I plagued Egypt with what I did in the midst of it, and afterward I brought you out.'"** The Lord's reminding them of all the wonderful favor He had shown to their ancestors through the centuries. But notice where it starts: **"Long ago, your fathers lived beyond the Euphrates, Terah, the father of Abraham and of Nahor; and they served other gods. Then I took your father Abraham..."**

Clearly, God's favor towards Abraham was not because Abraham had chosen God for Himself, he was serving other gods at the time! But when Abraham was lost and stood condemned, God intervened. And that's the way the rest of this story is recounted. It's God who has done all of this. It's not just a travel itinerary, like, "Abraham was over here, then he went over there, then Jacob went down to Egypt." The description of all these events highlights how God graciously intervenes. Here's Abraham and Nahor, and they served other gods. And then God just *chooses* Abraham and gives him this land. And even though Abraham is *super* old, He says, **"I made his offspring many. I gave him Isaac."** There's God intervening once more. Then He says how He plagued Egypt, look at all the miraculous intervention He did there for them. And then He continued to act and intervene in miraculous ways through the decades all the way until the events of verse 13, **"I gave you a land on which you had not labored and cities that you had not built, and you dwell in them. You eat the fruit of vineyards and olive orchards that you did not plant."** Even as they settle this new land, there's no work required on their part! Everything's already been put in place by God for them to simply settle in.

In all of these things, God has been intervening the entire time. You can only attribute all of it to His gracious and miraculous hand. They did not free themselves from Egypt! They did not conquer these enemies that stood in the way of the promised land! And that speaks to us and how God's grace works for us as well. It's only by the grace of God that we've been freed from the bondage of our sin. It's only by the grace of God that the enemies that stood in the way of our promised land of heaven have been defeated on our behalf. Thus God has done for each of you.

And now we have to bring that concluding statement of Joshua back to mind, **"And if it is evil in your eyes to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve."** Notice, he doesn't say, "Choose this day to serve the Lord," rather, he says, "After all that God has done for you, if it's still not good enough for you to serve the Lord, then choose someone else to serve." For when it comes to serving God, there's no choice in the matter. The choice has already been made for us, for God has chosen each of us. For like Abraham, we would have kept on serving the worthless gods of our own choices, yet God chose us. He chose us when He sent His Spirit into our hearts. He chose us in the waters of Baptism. He chose us when His Son gave up His life for us. He chose us when He looked away from our sins.

Observing all this grace, recounting the ways the Lord has served you—that ought to change the way we live. And yet, as sinners, we still try to serve other gods. But what God does and what God continues to do is not contingent upon us. It's a unilateral covenant of grace in which God says, **"I am your God, and you—my beloved people."** May we truly appreciate and cherish this singular, gracious focus of our God which He has trained right on us. And may the Lord grant us now a singular focus on the one true God alone who has made each of us worthy in Christ. Let us also serve the Lord. Amen.

**"And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."** (Philippians 4:7) Amen.

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