

Ignored and Misunderstood Scriptures - Joshua 24:14-16

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Volume 38, Number 28 July 18, 2021

Dear Friends,

The Old Testament often depicts Israel, God's worshipping people of the Old Testament era, as thinking they could go through empty motions of serving God, all the while serving their pagan idols, and have no problems. And the record of Scripture is just as faithful in reporting that every time--no exception--the Lord sent His severe chastening judgments against them for this abominable sin.

I am saddened by observations of professing Christians of my day. As an example, they will rightly object to abortion, even highlighting the frequent abortionist's words, "It is my body. I have a right to do with my own body as I wish. No one can tell me what to do with my body." If we are believers whose desire and objective is to serve and honor the Lord, these words stand out as mirror opposite of Scripture's reminders that we--all of us--belong to the Lord, not to ourselves. The only correct Biblical "Right" we have is to submit our bodies to Him in submissive service and obedience. In the last fifteen months, I have heard more than one of these professing believers who ignored strong medical information regarding COVID-19 and the vaccine, say in effect the exact words the abortionists' use, "It is my body. I have a right to do with my own body as I wish. No one can tell me what to do with my body." Do we belong to the Lord or to ourselves? The moment a professing believer borrows the exact words of the abortionist he/she destroys their credibility with observers. You can't severely criticize the abortionist for using these words and then repeat those same words in defense of your own self-chosen ways. When you say these words, you deny your belief in Scripture's reminder that we do not belong to ourselves.

What? know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own? For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's. (1Co 6:19-20 KJV)

Do we own our bodies, or did Jesus buy us, obligating us to glorify Him in our body as in our spirit, both body and spirit belonging to Him? We can't possibly claim this self-absorbed carnal attitude and make any credible attempt to fulfill the basic tenet of Biblical discipleship, self-denial and honoring others above self. ([Lu 9:23](#); [Php 2:3](#)) So do we use our bodies in a way to avoid any possible harm to other believers? Or do we use our bodies any way we wish, not at all unlike Israel in Joshua's day or Israel in [2Ki 17:32-33](#)?

Sadly we often think we have learned so much more than Old Testament Israel, so we need not beware the warnings of Scripture against imitating them? But, if we have learned more and are more faithful to the Lord than they, we need to manifest our higher faith by living the self-sacrificed life to God, not by imitating Israel in our own words and ways.

What shall we do today? Imitate Old Testament Israel? Or follow Jesus and His personal example of self-sacrificing service to others?

Lord bless, Joe Holder

Ignored and Misunderstood Scriptures

[\(Jos 24:14-16\)](#)

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. 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. And the people answered and said, God forbid that we should forsake the Lord, to serve other gods; (Jos 24:14-16 KJV 1900)

The “Ignored/misunderstood” point of [Jos 24:14-16](#) illustrates a sadly common habit among modern Christians, extracting brief words wholly out of context and imposing our own interpretation onto the words, consciously ignoring the context of the lesson. How often have we heard these folks ignore the context of this lesson, quoting only “...choose you this day whom ye will serve,” implying salvation by human works and choices? The context of this lesson in no way relates to eternal salvation. Joshua confronted and rebuked the people of Israel, God’s people, for their idolatry. It would be similar to these same people teaching the members of their own church the importance of living a faithful life of service to God. Sadly, Israel earned Joshua’s rebuke by repeated acts of idolatry. Notice Joshua’s command, “*put away the gods which your fathers served on the other side of the flood, and in Egypt.*”

Joshua’s “choose you this day whom ye will serve” is not a righteous choice which Israel needed to make; it was an unrighteous and unacceptable act conditioned on their prior faithless mindset, “*And if it seem evil unto you to serve the Lord....*” Israel’s right—and righteous—choice was set, “*serve ye the Lord*” “*in sincerity and in truth.*” For godly Israelites, no choice was necessary. Consider a simple example. If you and a godly friend are talking about a big decision he is facing, and he is discussing the pros and cons with you, you might offer something of a rhetorical response, “Do the right thing.” Whatever choice he makes, you encourage him to weigh his choices in light of God’s moral principles. If Israel obeyed Joshua’s teaching, they had no choice to make. They would turn from their idols, do the right thing, and serve the Lord “*in sincerity and in truth.*” Joshua only challenged them to make a choice if they had already rejected the Lord and had no intention of serving Him. And, in that case, they could choose one of any number of false gods, all of which were bad choices. In this case any choice, any “Choose ye” they made would be a bad decision, for it meant that they had already decided not to serve God. I have never heard a modern Bible teacher address this passage in context and make this point.

Joshua clears up another sinful attitude in his charge to Israel in our study passage. I’ve often heard pointless discussions of Jesus’ teaching to the Samaritan woman.

But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshipers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him. (Joh 4:23)

The discussion quotes this verse, but chooses to ignore the language of the verse by the pointless question, “Which is better, to worship God in spirit or to worship God in truth? Can you worship God in spirit and not in truth?” First, these folks wrongly assume that “spirit” is equivalent to sincerity. In this context Jesus reminded the Samaritan woman.

God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth. (Joh 4:24)

If we define “spirit” as “Sincerity” in one place in this context, we must interpret the word consistently throughout that context. Would these people dare to assert that Jesus intended to say, “God *is* sincerity”? Is that what Jesus intended? Clearly He didn’t at all have that idea in mind. He intended to teach the Samaritan woman that God is “Spirit,” not a material or physical being; He has no physical body, so claiming that worship must occur in one or another location presumes you must worship only in that location because God is physical, not Spirit, and therefore confined to that one location.

Further, the question, “Can you worship God in sincerity, but not in truth?” contradicts Jesus’ specific language. “**And**” means both spirit (Not mere sincerity) **and** truth are required for acceptable worship. I am persuaded; if people worked as hard to understand the correct contextual meaning of Scripture as they work to evade its simple obvious teaching, they would be far wiser than they are.

Consider what Joshua commanded Israel prior to the oft-quoted “*Choose ye this day...*”

1. *Now therefore fear the Lord.* All these commands are framed in the present tense. Joshua commanded the people to start doing things they were not presently doing. They needed a thorough-going repentance if they were to please and serve God.

2. *...and serve him in sincerity and in truth.* No either-or sincerity or truth, Joshua commanded both.

3. *...and put away the gods which your fathers served on the other side of the flood.*

4. *...and in Egypt.*

5. *...and serve ye the Lord.* They were presently more committed to idolatry than to the Lord. Joshua left no grounds for doubt. They could not serve any idols and serve the Lord. He has always commanded exclusive worship. He continues to do so now.

These people didn’t have a good record of serving God and forsaking their idols. They would gladly have served the Lord plus their idols, but that was not acceptable to the Lord.

With this background firmly set in our minds, let’s now go back to the misunderstood line. “**Choose ye this day whom ye will serve.**” But, even with all the clear teachings in the above five points, Joshua adds yet more emphasis.

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.

If any of the Israelites heard Joshua’s charge and obeyed, they would put away their idols, repent of past idolatries, and begin that day serving God alone. However, Joshua does not even address these people. He has no reason to do so. He addresses those who, despite Joshua’s rebuke and command, reject both Joshua and the Lord. **Only the unbelieving Israelites are told to choose.** And take careful note of the choice Joshua gives them. He does not give them a choice between God and their past idols. He gives them a choice between two different pagan idols! Underscore in your mind the “Either-or” options. Joshua gave the people an, either false god “A” or false god “B” choice.

...but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord. Neither Joshua nor his house had a choice. Their mind and their faith were committed to the Lord alone. How goes your faith? Are you content serving God **in His way and on His terms**? Or do you constantly look for alternatives, ways to “Worship” God on terms more suitable to your personal taste?

Consider another sad state in Israel.

So they feared the LORD, and made unto themselves of the lowest of them priests of the high places, which sacrificed for them in the houses of the high places. They feared the LORD, and served their own gods, after the manner of the nations whom they carried away from thence. (2Ki 17:32-33)

When God instituted His worship in the Old Testament by Moses, He specifically designated an exclusive priesthood from the tribe of Levi. He did not give Israel a choice of the men they wanted as their priests. From beginning to end, these two verses mark one ungodly contradiction after the other.

1. They “feared the LORD.” But they also ignored God and chose priests of the lowest moral quality, men who gladly followed their wishes to sacrifice to pagan idols in “high places,” not in God’s place.
2. They “feared the LORD,” but they also “served their own gods.”
3. Instead of studying Moses’ law and striving to obey it, they ignored Moses and patterned their “Worship” after “the manner of the nations” who were their captors.

Every time I read these two verses I shudder. It is as if I am reading the personal philosophy (or religion) of contemporary Christians. I talk to pastors across the country. With few exceptions, most of these men hear similar words and join me in fearing for the future of the people who have consciously and deliberately chosen to ignore the Bible and its teachings, but to claim God, all the while worshipping their own imaginations and wishes, not the Lord. “Israel,” the people of whom these verses were written, ceased to exist. They chose their own way, their own preferred religion, but God didn’t go along with their sinful choice. And God also did not stand as a protective shield between them and their adversaries. When the adversary went against them, they fell and soon ceased to exist.

As you study Genesis, pay special attention. Genesis carefully traces the generations of each son in a family for as long as each generation faithfully followed the Lord and His way. But when one generation forsook the Lord and His way, Genesis reports the forsaking, and the record of that person abruptly ends. Genesis stops recording their history.

God does not irresistibly decree your service to Him. He commands us, as Joshua commanded Israel, to put away our idol gods; we cannot—and should not—try to serve idols and God. He commands you and me to consciously abandon our own idols and to serve Him, to serve Him exclusively, and on His terms only with no mixing of our wishes and preferences. This is never a choice offered to God’s people in Scripture. It is always and only a direct commandment. The choice now, as it was then, is only for people who reject worshipping God on His terms. Choose any other option you wish. All are bad, and all will lead their followers into spiritual obscurity.

Today, what shall we do? Worship God, or chase our own bad choices?

Elder Joe Holder