

Which God do you serve?

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[0 : 00] We're going to open our Bibles now together and we're going to read in God's Word. And if you turn to the Old Testament, to the book of Joshua, and to Joshua chapter 24, the last chapter of this book.

And we're going to be thinking this morning very particularly about verses 14 and 15 and what they say to us about God and the challenge that they bring to God's people and to all people.

In fact, today just as much as when they were first spoken. Here we are right at the very end of the book. Joshua is an old man. He's fulfilled his ministry.

He is looking to the future and he is challenging God's people. And I'm going to read from verse 1 through verse 15 of chapter 24.

Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, the officers of Israel. And they presented themselves before God. And Joshua said to all the people, thus says the Lord, the God of Israel.

[1 : 16] Long ago your fathers lived beyond the Ephrates. 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. 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 afterwards I brought you out. Then I brought your fathers out of Egypt. And you came to the sea. And the Egyptians pursued your fathers with chariots and horsemen to the Red Sea.

And when they cried to the Lord, he put darkness between you and the Egyptians. And made the sea come up and cover them. And your eyes saw what I did in Egypt.

And you lived in the wilderness a long time. And I brought you to the land of the Amorites who lived on the other side of the Jordan. And they fought with you. And I gave them into your hand.

[2 : 23] And you took possession of their land. And I destroyed them before you. And then Balak the son of Zippor, king of Moab, arose and fought against Israel. And he sent and invited Balaam the son of Baer to curse you.

But I would not listen to Balaam. Indeed he blessed you. So I delivered you out of his hand. And you went over the Jordan and came to Jericho.

And the leaders of Jericho fought against you. And also the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Gergashites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. And I gave them into your hand.

And I sent the hornet before you, which drove them out before you, the two kings of the Amorites. It was not by your sword or by your bow. I gave you a land.

And if it's evil in your eyes to serve the Lord.

[3 : 37] Choose this day whom you will serve. Whether the gods your father served in the region beyond the river. Or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you now dwell.

But as for me and my house. We will serve the Lord. Amen. May God bless to us his word.

Well, perhaps you'd turn with me to Joshua chapter 24. And I'm particularly concerned this morning with the question that verse 15 really poses to us.

We've been thinking about some of these penetrated questions that the Bible poses to us as human beings. The questions, if you like, that God puts to man.

Today we often, or people often think it's the other way around, don't they? They think that God's in the dock. That God is being peppered with questions by human beings. That is, if God's really there at all. It's us who's questioning him.

[4 : 48] Why does God allow this? Where is God in the midst of that? Where are you, God? But in fact, as we've seen, it's the other way around, really.

From the very beginning of human history, it's man who's been lost. It's man who's been hiding. And it's God who's been putting the questions to us.

So way back in Genesis 3, remember, after man's first disobedience, it's God saying, Where are you? And what have you done to human beings? And then last time we saw in Genesis chapter 4, God questioning Cain, the murderer, and saying, Why are you so angry?

Why are you so miserable? You've messed up so badly, Cain. But it doesn't have to be that way. It's always God putting man in the dock.

And today I want to focus on another question that the Bible asks of each of us. And it's this question. Which God are you serving?

[5 : 56] Who do you worship in life? Now again, you might think that that's a question that comes from us, from the human side.

You might ask somebody, Well, do you believe in God at all? Do you worship any God? But the Bible says, No, that's the wrong question.

Because in reality, everybody worships some God or other. And the question is simply, Which God do you serve? Is it the true and living God?

The God who is worthy of all worship? The God who is powerful to help us? Or is it some false God? Is it, in fact, a God who is impotent to help us, but actually powerful to enslave us?

Because that's the truth. We all serve somebody or something. You may have heard the saying that's attributed to G.K. Chesterton.

[7 : 00] Probably didn't say it exactly like this, but anyway, it's a good saying. When men stop believing in God, they don't believe in nothing. They believe in anything. And what he's saying there is it's not possible to serve nothing in life.

Human beings all serve something or somebody. Here's another literary genius, a bit different to G.K. Chesterton. I don't know if there's any Bob Dylan fans in church today.

But he said the same thing, didn't he, in that song. You've got to serve somebody. You may be an ambassador to England or France. You may like to gamble. You may like to dance. You may be the heavyweight champion of the world.

You may be a socialite with a long string of pearls. But you're going to have to serve somebody.

Yes, indeed, you're going to have to serve somebody. It may be the devil or it may be the Lord. But you're going to have to serve somebody.

You might be a rock and roll addict, prancing in the stage. You might have drugs at your command.

Women in the cage. You may be a businessman or some high degree thief. They may call you doctor.

[8 : 00] They may call you chief. But you're going to have to serve somebody. See, G.K.

Chesterton, Bob Dylan. All of us, when we really think about it, we recognize that truth, don't we?

That something or someone is in control of our lives. And so the real question is not, do you worship God?

The real question is, which God do you serve with your life? And that's the question that God put to Israel through his leader Joshua.

Just as they were about to enter the next phase of their life, as they're about to enter the promised land after 40 years in the wilderness. And the challenge he throws down to them here is in verse 15. Choose today which God you are going to serve. He's recognizing they will be serving some God or other.

[9 : 00] And he's forcing them to see that and to make a conscious choice. And God, ever since, right up to the present day, is asking all of us that question.

Which God will it be for you? Not will you serve the God of the Bible who's made known in Jesus Christ or no God, be free of all gods.

No, you will be serving some God, whatever you choose. The question is, which one will it be?

Now, you might be tempted to say, well, but that's out of date.

That was probably right for those far-off days when everybody in these primitive cultures were religious. When everybody did believe in some God or other or spirits or something like that.

But that's not true any longer. That sort of mumbo-jumbo is in the past. That's not part of our world, our culture, our modern world. No, no, no. Our secularized world, our post-modern world.

[9 : 59] They just put all that away. That's nonsense. But I think, I want to suggest you're wrong, if you might think that. And actually, to say that we can just dismiss all that sort of talk of religion, actually, it's a very arrogant thing to say, isn't it?

It's very patronizing. Because if you're going to say, well, all of these things are just versions of the same primitive thing, and I'm putting it all away, that's actually to claim omniscience for yourself, isn't it?

It's to claim that you have all knowledge perfectly and are therefore able to declare absolutely that all these other things are wrong. Often people do that today or want to do that today, and yet at the same time, they want to maintain that everything is relative.

But they don't seem to see that by dismissing all of these things, you're making an absolute claim. I mean, you're denying the very thing that you say is impossible. But anyway, it just simply isn't true, is it?

That education and culture, where it's real and pure, must leave all sort of primitive things like religion behind. Think of the height of Greek culture and education.

[11 : 19] I suppose it was epitomized by the Areopagus, wasn't it, in the first century? It was full of philosophers, of culture, all sorts of highbrow learning. That's the culture, isn't it? They gave us the Greek myths, the tragedies, gave us Socrates and Pythagoras and Plato and Aristotle, all of these whose thinking underpins the whole of Western philosophy and civilization and science.

We can't just call that primitive mumbo-jumbo culture, can we? It was highly educated. And yet, when you turn to Acts chapter 17, do you remember when the apostle Paul visited Athens, that seat of learning?

And in the midst of all that logic and philosophy and discussion and all the rest of it, what did he find? He found a city that was full of objects of worship, even with a shrine to the one that they called the unknown god, in case they missed one out.

So even these highbrow Athenian professors were actually very religious, just as all people today are actually very religious, whether they know it or not, whether they're conscious of it or not. Perhaps today we would use different words. We might use the word spirituality rather than religion. But still, it's just as true. We're all worshipping something or someone.

[12 : 47] Now, it can be primitive religious idolatry. It can be worshipping statues and idols and ancestors and all that sort of thing. And it is that in many parts of the world.

But it can also be a very intellectual, educated idolatry, very cultured, very grand. And yet, you know, even in our Western culture, even in our culture today, with all its intellectual roots in that Greek culture, still you find so much just plain old superstition.

It's rife in sport, isn't it? Most sportsmen are incredibly superstitious. It's footballers wearing their special boots and all the rest of it, all the special bootstraps. But you find it even among very educated, intelligent people.

I was watching an interview the other day just that Paul gave me, of the author, Robert Caro, who's written all these enormous political biographies. And he admitted he's very, very superstitious. Somebody asked him what his next book was going to be, and he said, oh, I'm superstitious. If I tell you what it is, I don't think I'll be able to write it. Extraordinary intelligent man. But superstition is rife, isn't it? Here's what Martin Luther says.

[13 : 59] Whatever your heart clings to and relies on, that is your God. Whatever you trust in and rely on for salvation or for satisfaction in life, that is your Savior.

Whatever you love and serve and give your life to and give your life for, perhaps. That is your Lord. That is who owns you or what owns you.

So which God do you worship? And you know, that worship in your life can look very religious, or it can actually look very irreligious and very secular.

That's why people sometimes don't believe that they are worshipping. But I don't think very much has really changed in the 4,000 years since Joshua spoke these words to God's people, because human beings, the human heart hasn't actually changed very much.

Look at verse 15 carefully. See, Joshua gives two alternatives here to worship. Two alternatives to worshipping the true God of the Bible, the God of Israel, the creator God.

[15 : 11] And both of these alternatives are false gods. Both of them are idolatry. It's very important to see that. He is not saying, serve God or you'll be serving nothing. He is saying, serve the true God or you will inevitably be serving one or other of these false gods.

Well, what are they? Look at verse 15. Either, you see, it'll be the gods your father served, way back in Mesopotamia, or it'll be the gods of the Amorites, the Canaanites, whose land you're entering.

So if you're not serving the one true God, you'll either be serving the gods of the old abandoned culture or the gods of your new adopted culture. You'll either be serving, if I can put it this way, the gods of the old age, old age religion, or you'll be serving the new culture, the new age of spirituality, where you're going.

But the true way, the worship of the true and real God of the Bible is neither of these things. And that's so important. I want to suggest, friends, that that is really just the same today.

That's the choice that the Bible tells us is the reality. People are either following Jesus Christ, the one true God, as Savior and Lord, or they will be enslaved and they'll be serving the old gods, popular folk religion and tradition of their fathers, traditional religion, or they'll be serving new gods. [16:43] They might be very trendy, new spiritualities of our contemporary fluid culture. Traditional religion or contemporary spiritualities.

Just think about what that looks like in our own culture today. First of all, take the traditional religion, the old gods of the past culture that we've left behind.

In this country, I think I would describe that as sort of folk Christianity. It's what you get when a country was Christianized like ours has been.

People talk about being born and brought up in a Christian society. Of course, it wasn't Christian at all in the sense of what the Bible means by that. But we did have a Christianized cultural expectation.

And that's the traditional religion of our fathers in recent centuries. That's a thing of the modern world. It's disappearing fast in our Western world today, isn't it?

[17:45] It's disappeared faster here in our country perhaps than it has across the Atlantic in America. But it's beginning to disappear rapidly there as well. And somebody who's serving that god, the traditional sort of folk Christianity that they were vaguely brought up with at school.

That sort of person probably values reason. They probably value morals. They have a high sense of duty, of service. That's much more important to them than freedom and rights and that sort of thing. They may have very strong political leanings in one particular way or another. They might be very religious, might be very involved in church and so on. Might be for some that guilt is a very big factor in their thinking.

You find that particularly in somebody who's been brought up in that Roman Catholic folk Christianity tradition. You find it also in somebody who's been brought up in certain very strict Protestant homes.

But there's a very strong desire to be a good person. To be seen to be a good person by other people. As well as of course by God. And so there's a striving for acceptance.

[18:52] But actually it's very easy in that sort of cultural context to be serving a false god. To be serving an idol. To be serving the old god of a traditional sort of folk Christianity which is actually devoid of much true Christianity.

Because that's not the true god of the Bible at all, is it? It's a god of human creation. It's a savior that we have bigged up in our mind.

Really in the image of man. You do this. You live like this. You give to that. And God will then reward you. God will accept you. You'll measure up.

That kind of god can be an example of how we're to live. A guide to our lives. The way we should live. But ultimately, you see, if that is your outlook, then what you're really clinging to, what you're really relying upon, is actually your own performance.

It's living the right way. It's doing the right things. Making the right responses. It's living by a sort of moralistic duty. And what that means is that the god you are really serving is actually the god of your own performance.

[20:11] Your own self-righteousness. And so if your personality tends towards the negative and the depressive, well, you'll just be knowing all the time, won't you?

That you're not attaining those goals that you're setting for yourself. And so you'll be in despair. Or if your personality is the opposite. If you're the sort of person that's rather full of yourself and rather arrogant, well, you'll think you do live up to that.

You'll be a rather pompous religious hypocrite. Or if you're a very anxious person, then you can live your life in fear, being driven, consumed by doubts.

Because your savior ultimately is yourself and your own performance. You see, you're trusting, aren't you, in a very fragile savior. That's your concept.

You're owned. You're owned. You're ruled. By a very unforgiving lord and master. So you can be very religious. You can be very moral.

[21 : 10] But you still can't find a real savior. And that's the god of traditional religion in this country. Traditional folk Christianity.

No wonder it's been rejected. It's as far from the true god of the Bible as the east is from the west. What about the new gods?

What about the contemporary spirituality of our post-modern world? Well, if that's you, then you'll be somebody who's rejected these old gods of tradition.

You've got no interest in that sort of moralistic duty. Much more focused on freedom. Not duty, but pleasure. Fulfillment.

That's what it's all about. Not traditional, not conservative in that sense, but very open. Very liberal. Very relativist in your outlook.

[22 : 08] Now, many folk like that think that they are, in fact, irreligious. They've rejected all that phony, restrictive, religious stuff about God and the church and so on. Of course, what you've actually rejected, if that's you, is in fact an empty and a crippling false religion of the past.

Old gods, not the true God of the Bible at all. But even if you've rejected all of that for something new and liberating and spiritual in your own mind, in fact, you are still worshipping.

It's just that you're worshipping a different kind of idol. You've just swapped the old gods for the new gods. You might have consciously rejected these values of the old world, values of duty and service and moral uprightness and so on.

And instead, you've pursued freedom. You've pursued self-fulfillment. You've pursued that great thing, which is my identity. You're not interested in those sort of things that once gave people status or approval from others and society and so on.

You're not interested in the things that once drove people's lives, gave them meaning. Political ideologies, political parties, membership of certain organizations and that sort of thing.

[23 : 28] That's dissipating hugely in our culture now, isn't it? Why bother? Who cares about convictions like that? We just want to do the pragmatic thing. We just want to do what gets us what we want in life.

But you see, if you think like that, you're actually still being driven, aren't you? You're seeking recognition. You're seeking approval. You're seeking acceptance just in a different way. Often it's in social media that you get it these days.

And people today in many ways are just pursuing these same things in a different way. They want material success. They want material wealth.

Who cares how you get it? It's what you get. They're pursuing an image. Pursuing independence, perhaps. Freedom from constraints and obligations and that sort of thing.

So we think that we live in a much more emancipated society. People are free of the burdens of these old religions, these old gods. But people aren't so free, are they?

[24 : 34] We're not liberated from stress. We're not liberated from burnout. We're not liberated from depression and all of these things. These things are rife in our society. Have these new freedoms really liberated us?

You can't escape the burdensome lordship of some god or other. It's hard to get emancipation by ourselves.

That's why the great feminist emancipation in many ways is such an illusion. It's just one example, but there are many. Women serving the old gods of the past, they gained value, gained wealth in their own eyes and in their world's eyes by the relationships of dependence that they had, by marriage, by family, by children and so on.

And so often they were desperate to attain these things and very miserable if they didn't. They were slaves to that god of those particular expectations for women.

Today, feminists serving the new gods have rejected all of that. They don't want to attain value and worth by any of these old things. It's in different things. It's in a career.

[25 : 54] It's in relationships of independence, of self-sufficiency and so on. Those are the things that give you freedom. So you desperately seek those things. But you're just as miserable if you don't find those things because you're still being justified and getting your worth and getting your identity in these new things, these new gods that you're serving.

That's why even ardent feminists like Germaine Greer can see that sort of thing now. Back in the 1960s, her book, what was it called? The Female Eunuch.

It was a rallying cry, wasn't it, to women to throw off these overlords that so enslaved them in the past.

Despise these things. Despise motherhood. Despise children and all of that. It was very interesting that just a few years ago, she was writing very differently. Lamenting the fact that far from bringing salvation, real liberation, actually that movement had done nothing of the kind for women.

So she wrote equality as a very poor substitute for liberation. Actually, she talks about mourning for her unborn babies and those like her who threw away the so-called oppression of family life for the apparent liberation of career.

[27 : 15] And she says the immense rewardingness of children is the best kept secret in the Western world. That's quite a turnaround, isn't it? But of course, Germaine Greer doesn't get to speak now, does she?

She's de-platformed on university campuses because she's not singing from the hymn sheet of today's zeitgeist. Now, don't misunderstand me. I'm not arguing that everything about the feminist movement has been wrong or that the old gods that women had to serve to be valued in the world, that those shouldn't have been put away and laid open to scrutiny.

In fact, quite the reverse because the very reason there was a revolt against these things was because these cultural norms were false gods. They were powerless gods. They were things that did, in many ways, suppress and subjugate.

But the point is, if the old gods can't satisfy, neither can the new ones, neither can the new idols. Just exchanging one idol for another doesn't get you anywhere. To think that ditching one set of gods for another set of gods is going to liberate you, give you everything that you seek, that is sheer fantasy.

That's what Germaine Greer and many others have recognized about that particular issue. Just substituting one set of oppressive masters for another because Bob Dylan was right.

[28 : 40] You've got to serve somebody for something in life. If your life is not under the gracious and liberating lordship of the one true God of heaven and earth, the God who made you, the God who owns you, the God who alone can understand you and know how you take, the God who can give you your true identity, then you're going to be serving some other God.

A powerless idol. One that can't ever, ever help to liberate you or satisfy you, but will certainly enslave you. And that's the only real power that idols and false gods have.

They do have the power to enslave. Whether it's an ideology that consumes you and drives you, whether it's an anxiety that cripples you, whether it's some kind of guilt that oppresses you, or whether it's some kind of identity, sexual identity, gender identity that you feel you must serve and bow down to.

You've got to serve somebody. You might like to wear cotton. You might like to wear silk. You might like to drink whiskey. You might like to drink milk. You might like to eat caviar.

You might like to eat bread. You may be sleeping on the floor, sleeping in a king-size bed, but you're going to have to serve somebody. There's a perennial question.

[30 : 10] Which God do you serve? If you're serving the old gods, the old gods of Christianity, churchianity, respectable religion, well, you need to know that that actually is a false God.

It's a false God. Because what you're really doing is just trusting and relying on yourself for the goodness that you need, for the righteousness that you require.

That's a total disaster. It's a disaster because you cannot save yourself. Neither can I. And there's lots of people, you know, all through our country, particularly in the older generations, have been in church services all their lives.

And yet that, at heart, is just what they're trying to do. Save themselves. Because they've never understood the true Christian gospel. But only one God can ever really save you.

And that's the true God of the Bible who himself is the Savior. The God who can truly forgive you. And give you the blameless record that you do need.

[31 : 19] Because he takes away your guilt. Takes away your underperformance, your inadequacy. Takes away your sin. And he gives you, in place of that, his righteousness, his purity, his perfection.

The real record of righteousness that you do need before a holy God. But on the other hand, you might be somebody who's not nearly so worried about being good or righteous.

You're just somebody who wants to be free. And you serve the new gods, those gods of apparent freedom and fulfillment and pleasure and liberating identity.

But you see, you also need to know that you are serving a false God. A powerless God. Full of false promises that will always, in the end, just disappoint you. They'll have you chasing fleeting pleasures.

But they'll keep you enslaved with promises that simply will not last. Only one God can ever really free you and fulfill you forever.

[32 : 28] So that you can truly love and love him and serve him without fear, without disappointment. And that's the God of the Bible. Not vague, folk religious nonsense with notions of morality.

not the shifting spiritualities of today's trends, but a real God. A God who is there. A God with a name.

Look at verse 15. Do you see? He's got a name. Yahweh, Jehovah, capital letters, L-O-R-D in our Bibles. The personal covenant name of God. He is real. He has a name and he can be known personally.

And he has a history. So we can know what he's done and what he's like. This God, you see, has a track record that you can trust. We read through it all in the whole of chapter 24 there, verses 1 to 13.

Look back just a few pages to chapter 21 of Joshua. In the end there, verse 43 to 45. This is really the climax of the whole of the story of the book of Joshua.

[33 : 35] And it sums up there in a few verses just what everything he has done for his people. Thus the Lord gave to Israel all the land that he swore to give to their fathers.

And they took possession of it and they settled there. And the Lord gave them rest on every side just as he had sworn to their fathers. Not one of all the enemies had withstood them for the Lord had given all their enemies into their hands.

Not one word of all the good promises that the Lord had made to the house of Israel had failed. All came to pass. You see, that is the God that Joshua is speaking about.

When he calls people to choose this God, it's the God who's done all of these things. It's the God of promise whose word never fails.

He's the God of faithfulness whose works never fail. He's the God of salvation who truly does liberate his people forever. And he's the God of great reward who does give constantly to his people beyond even their greatest imaginings.

[34 : 48] And Joshua says, as for me and my house, we will serve this God. This God. Why on earth would anybody want to serve any other?

When there's such evidence of who this God is and what he's really like. Now friends, here's the thing. Every one of us here today, we have so much more of the history of this true God, don't we? This God with a name, this God we can know personally. He came down in the person of his son, Jesus Christ, in the flesh. And he came to be the savior that we need.

He came to be the Lord that we can truly trust. And he has done everything that endless, relentless service of the old gods could never do for you.

He has done it for us. He's presented a perfect life to God, a perfect sacrifice for sin. And he gives it to us freely. There's no performance required.

[35 : 59] There's no performance possible. It is free forgiveness, full forgiveness, full acceptance with him. That's a savior worth having. And he offers everything that the new gods can promise but can never deliver.

True identity, real freedom, absolute fulfillment, life as it is meant to be forever and ever. because to know him is to know life itself.

And to have him as our Lord and our Master is to know perfect freedom, liberation. That's a Lord that you can trust your life to. My yoke is easy, says Jesus.

My burden is light. So which god do you serve? That's the question that the Bible asks to us. it's your choice and we all make a choice whether we realize it or not.

You've got to serve somebody. So which is it going to be? Is it going to be the powerless, sterile, old gods? Or is it going to be equally powerless and oppressive new gods?

[37 : 14] Or is it going to be the Lord, the God with power to liberate, to lead us in the paths of true and lasting peace?

It's up to you, says Joshua. Don't think that God doesn't care what you choose. The Christian gospel never says, well, it's heaven or hell, it's life or death.

You choose, see if I care. No, no, no. The Bible urges us, God himself urges us, Christ urges us, choose life. Serve the Lord, bow the knee to Jesus Christ.

I came into the world not to condemn but to save, said the Lord Jesus. This God cares. He commands us to serve him.

Of course he does. He's the Lord of heaven and earth. But he longs for us to serve him. He desires that we should serve him. He calls, he invites us to serve him.

[38 : 20] And he sent his son, his only son, to seek and to save the lost so that they might serve him in gladness and in joy forever and ever.

You've got to serve somebody. So which God do you serve? Take Joshua's words in verse 14 to heart.

As we close today. Therefore, fear the Lord. 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, the God with a name, the God made known to us in the grace and mercy of his son, Jesus Christ.

there is salvation. There is liberation. Well, let's pray. Lord, we thank you that in the midst of the false and the powerless gods of this age, you've revealed to us your name.

You've sent to us your son, Jesus Christ, and exalted his name above every name. And one day, every knee will bow and confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

[39 : 44] so grant us, Lord, we pray, the grace to bow our knees to that name alone today and always so that forsaking all other, we and all our households also may serve you for the great glory of Christ and for our eternal blessing in him.

Hear us, we pray. for Jesus' sake, Amen.