

Service: Our response to the grace of God

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[0 : 00] The reading this evening is from Joshua chapter 24. It's on page 239 in the church Bibles. So Joshua chapter 24 on page 239.

Then Joshua assembled all the tribes of Israel at Shechem.

He summoned the elders, leaders, judges and officials of Israel and they presented themselves before God. Joshua said to all the people, this is what the Lord, the God of Israel says.

Long ago, your ancestors, including Terah, the father of Abraham and Nahor, lived beyond the river Euphrates and worshipped other gods.

But I took your father Abraham from the land beyond the Euphrates and led him throughout Canaan and gave him many descendants. I gave him Isaac and to Isaac I gave Jacob and Esau.

[1 : 08] I assigned the hill country of Seir to Esau, but Jacob and his family went down to Egypt.

Then I sent Moses and Aaron and I afflicted the Egyptians by what I did there and I brought you out.

When I brought your people out of Egypt, you came to the sea and the Egyptians pursued them with chariots and horsemen as far as the Red Sea. But they cried to the Lord for help and he put darkness between you and the Egyptians.

He brought the sea over them and covered them. You saw with your own eyes what I did to the Egyptians. Then you lived in the wilderness for a long time.

I brought you to the land of the Amorites who lived east of the Jordan. They fought against you, but I gave them into your hands. I destroyed them from before you and you took possession of their land.

When Balak, son of Zippor, the king of Moab, prepared to fight against Israel, he sent to Balaam, son of Beor, to put a curse on you. But I would not listen to Balaam, so he blessed you again and again and I delivered you out of his hand.

[2 : 26] Then you crossed the Jordan and came to Jericho. The citizens of Jericho fought against you, as did also the Amorites, Perizzites, Canaanites, Hittites, Girgashites, Hivites, and Jebusites.

But I gave them into your hands. I sent the hornet ahead of you, which drove them out before you, also the two Amorite kings. You did not do it with your own sword and bow.

So I gave you a land on which you did not toil, and cities you did not build. And you live in them, and eat from vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant. Now fear the Lord, and serve him with all faithfulness.

Throw away the gods your ancestors worshipped, beyond the river Euphrates, and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living.

But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord. Then the people answered, Far be it for us to forsake the Lord to serve other gods. It was the Lord our God himself who brought us and our parents up out of Egypt, from that land of slavery, and performed those great signs before our eyes.

[3 : 53] He protected us on our entire journey, and among all the nations through which we travelled. And the Lord drove out before us all the nations, including the Amorites who lived in the land.

We too will serve the Lord, because he is our God. Joshua said to the people, You are not able to serve the Lord. He is a holy God.

He is a jealous God. He will not forgive your rebellion and your sins. If you forsake the Lord and serve foreign gods, he will turn and bring disaster on you, and make an end of you, after he has been good to you.

But the people said to Joshua, No, we will serve the Lord. Then Joshua said, You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen to serve the Lord.

Yes, we are witnesses, they replied. Now then, said Joshua, Throw away the foreign gods that are among you, and yield your hearts to the Lord, the God of Israel.

[4 : 54] And the people said to Joshua, We will serve the Lord our God and obey him. On that day, Joshua made a covenant for the people, and there at Shechem he reaffirmed for them decrees and laws.

And Joshua recorded these things in the book of the law of God. Then he took a large stone and set it up there under the oak near the holy place of the Lord. See, he said to all the people, This stone will be a witness against us.

It has heard all the words the Lord has said to us. It will be a witness against you if you are untrue to your God. Then Joshua dismissed the people, each to their own inheritance.

After these things, Joshua, son of Nun, the servant of the Lord, died at the age of 110. And they buried him in the land of his inheritance at Timnath-Serah in the hill country of Ephraim, north of Mount Gaash.

Israel served the Lord throughout the lifetime of Joshua and of the elders who outlived him and who had experienced everything the Lord had done for Israel. And Joseph bones, which the Israelites had brought up from Egypt, were buried at Shechem in the tract of land that Jacob bought for a hundred pieces of silver from the sons of Hamor, the father of Shechem.

[6 : 18] This became the inheritance of Joseph's descendants. And Eleazar, son of Aaron, died and was buried at Gibeah, which had been allotted to his son Phinehas in the hill country of Ephraim.

Amen. Let's pray as we sit.

May the words of my lips and the meditations of all our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight. O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

So, tonight we come to the end of the story. And it's been pointed out that Joshua comes in four parts.

If you take your notice sheet, you'll have rather a complicated outline that I've prepared. And I've put the Hebrew words just because you can actually see it in the Hebrew.

[7 : 23] If you translate it into English, it's less easy to see. The first five chapters have the theme of passing over or crossing, and that's avar.

Then the next six chapters, six to twelve, have the theme of take. Lakach. Then you have the chapters that we did all in Awana, 13 to 21, have the theme of divide.

Kalach. And finally, our last three chapters have the theme of serve. Avad. How significant it is that the first and the last of those four words have their first two letters the same, and the third one different.

So, it's avar and avad. I don't know. And then the second and third are anagrams of each other. Lakach and kalach. So, maybe there is some significance in the way that these four words are used.

The important thing is that our theme tonight is serve. And you'll see that. And you might expect me tonight to sort of bring the book of Joshua together.

[8 : 32] But actually, I think in some ways, that's what happened last week. The context for tonight's reading is much bigger than that.

Chapter 23, in a way, concludes, ties up Joshua rather nicely. It looks back over the story of Joshua, and it revisits some of the themes we had in chapter 1.

For instance, in chapter 23, in verse 6, we had the verse, Be very strong, be careful to obey all that is written in the book of the law of Moses without turning aside to the right or to the left.

Which reminded us of chapter 1 and verse 7. Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you.

Do not turn from it to the right or to the left. So, if last week we sort of tied up Joshua pretty well, what about tonight?

[9 : 36] What are we going to do? Well, I think we're going to go much further back. We're going to go back to Genesis 12, and this will tie up these, well, the first six books of the Bible, at least starting from Genesis 12.

And we see this in verse 1. Then Joshua assembled all the tribes of Israel at Shechem. Now, I don't know whether that shouts to you, but I think it did shout to them.

It's a central place in the history of Israel. It's where the Lord appeared to Abram and promised to give the land to his offspring. That's Genesis 12, verses 6 and 7.

You'll find that on the notice sheet outline towards the end. And that key verse goes like this. Abram traveled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem.

The Lord appeared to Abram and said, To your offspring I will give this land. And Abram responded by building an altar.

[10:48] Later on, Jacob bought land here and built an altar. That's Genesis 33. It's also appeared by implication in Joshua 8.

It's between Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim. So it must have been here that the covenant was renewed after the disaster at Ai. But the crucial reference is going back to Genesis 12.

The point is that then, at Shechem, God promised both a people and a land. And now, those promises have been fulfilled.

And so Joshua takes this opportunity to look back over the whole history of Israel from Genesis 12. And he does this in the presence of God.

For they presented themselves before God. And he tells the story in four paragraphs. I like the way it's laid out in the NIV because you can see the four paragraphs.

[11:53] And each of those paragraphs involves a deliverance. A rescue. To take the first one, which is 2 to 4.

Verses 2 to 4. Long ago, he says, your ancestors, including Terah, the father of Abraham and Nahor, lived beyond the Euphrates River and worshipped other gods.

But I took your father Abraham. That was the rescue of Abraham from the darkness of idolatry.

And he took him from the land beyond the Euphrates and gave him the great promise. He says, I gave him many descendants. I quite like the way that's expressed, though.

Because what it actually says, verse 3 and 4, I gave him many descendants. I gave him Isaac. And to Isaac, I gave Jacob and Esau. So actually, only one son is mentioned.

[12:59] That's one descendant and two grandsons. So actually, it takes a long time. It's a bit like, much the same with the land.

He says, verse 4, I assigned the hill country of Seir to Esau, but Jacob and his family went down to Egypt. Again, a promise of a land, but not yet.

What we notice here is that God, Joshua says, has kept his promise, but we perhaps note that his promises are not always kept on the time scale that we want.

They're on God's time scale. hundreds of years in the case of the land. That promise I've summed up, that paragraph I've summed up as God of promise.

Now, if we turn to the next paragraph, that's 5 to 7, I'm summarizing that as the God of power.

Again, it starts with a deliverance, a rescue.

[14:06] The Israelites are in Egypt and it doesn't say anything more than that, but the point is that they're oppressed and God cared for them.

Verse 5, I sent Moses and Aaron and I afflicted the Egyptians by what I did there and I brought you out. Again, the emphasis on God, I sent, I brought, but I like the fact that we've moved from your ancestors to you.

We're getting not too far from Joshua's own time. I brought you out. And then we have the fullest description of the deliverance.

Verse 6, when I brought your people out of Egypt, you came to the sea and the Egyptians pursued them with chariots and horsemen as far as the Red Sea. But they cried to the Lord for help and he put darkness between you and the Egyptians.

He brought the sea over them and covered them. That's the great deliverance. God's people are brought out of Egypt. In some ways, that's the supreme miracle of the Old Testament.

[15:25] And it should, in a way, have been the end of that whole part of the story. But of course, it wasn't. Because of lack of faith, they didn't go on to take the promised land.

Not then. And that summed up very briefly in the words, then you lived in the wilderness for a long time. No mention of the fact that only Joshua and Caleb wanted to go in.

He doesn't mention that. But it was a result of lack of faith. So then, we move from those first sections of promise and power.

We move to verses 8 to 10. God's rescuing them from their wilderness wanderings. I brought you to the land of the Amorites who lived east of the Jordan.

They fought against you, but I gave them into your hands. I destroyed them from before you, and you took possession of their land. When Balak, son of Zippor, the king of Moab, prepared to fight against Israel, he sent for Balaam, son of Beor, to put a curse on you.

[16:33] But I wouldn't listen to Balaam. So he blessed you again and again, and I delivered you out of his hand. God of promise, God of power, God of protection.

And I'm rather fascinated by the way that the protection is expressed. Two sorts of protection. One, military, the one that we've been so familiar with as we've been studying Joshua.

God gave them into their hands. But the other protection he gave them was spiritual. It's quite a long description in Numbers 22 to 24 of how Balaam was offered bribes to curse God's people. But he was never able to do so. God prevented him. You know the story quite well. Balaam's ass stopped him when it spoke.

Promise, power, protection, and now the final paragraph of this recital of God's grace. First there's a, I think we can still call it a deliverance.

[17:52] Then you crossed the Jordan and came to Jericho. The citizens of Jericho fought against you as did also the Amorites, Perizzites, Canaanites, Hittites, Girgashites, Hivites, and Jebusites.

But I gave them into your hands. It's a long list. We sort of enjoy reading it out. Or some people hate reading it out.

It probably depends who you are. But actually, the thing about it is that it's a terrifying list. We read them out. We don't know who they are. They are long ago. We probably, some of them sound rather exciting like Perizzites.

We wonder who Hivites are and this sort of thing. But actually, these are terrifying people. But God does all the providing. Verse 12, I sent the hornet ahead of you which drove them out.

We don't know whether the hornet is a physical hornet or whether this is a metaphorical hornet that somehow this is part of the deliverance process because the hornet is not mentioned anywhere else.

[18:55] It doesn't matter. The point is you didn't do it with your own sword and bow. Well, of course, they did it with their own swords and bows in one sense. But it was God who gave the victory.

So Joshua says they have this amazing God. A God of provision. Verse 13, I gave you a land on which you did not toil and cities you did not build and you live in them and eat from vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant.

I love that description. I gave, I destroyed, I sent, you did not toil, you did not build, you did not plant. It's a sort of classic description of grace, isn't it?

So what they're being invited to celebrate this day in Shechem is this wonderful God, God of promise.

He keeps his promises though it may take five or six hundred years. God of power at the Red Sea and the Jordan. God of protection from enemies, material and spiritual.

[20:05] And God of provision. This amazing land. And it's good for us to look back at God's grace to us and give thanks. We can look at this passage and it's good but we might find it easier to look at the first chapter of Ephesians and just go through it and notice the way that Paul recites God's grace in a more new covenant sense.

He goes through election, adoption, redemption, forgiveness, the knowledge of God's will, inheritance. We can go through that. I'm not going to do it now but you could do that afterwards or tomorrow morning or whenever you like.

Or we could use the general thanksgiving and the prayer book would do as well. Another method of reciting God's goodness to us and then responding.

I'll come back to that. So how do we respond to God's grace? Well the key thing as I said at the very beginning is to serve. I said that was the key Hebrew word for this section of Joshua.

Seven times in verses 14 to 16. Eighteen times in the whole chapter. But what does it mean to serve? I think if you look at the way it's being used in this chapter and elsewhere it's pretty similar to worship.

[21:30] The crucial question is where will you be each Sabbath, each day? Will you be worshipping God or worshipping idols? To read out a very familiar Psalm verse from the Jubilates,

Psalm 100, serve the Lord with gladness and come before his presence with a song.

They're pretty similar. Serving the Lord with gladness come before his presence with a song. Here, serving isn't doing good in general.

Even doing good for the Lord's sake. Helping out there in some role, some important spiritual role that God has given you. That is indeed of course serving God.

In fact it's absolutely central and important. But actually here it seems to mean worship. Putting God first.

But it's more than just turning up at church on a Sunday although that's a great start. It involves fearing and throwing away verse 14. Verse 14, now fear the Lord and serve him with all faithfulness.

[22 : 44] Throw away the gods your ancestors worshipped. Fearing the Lord is a phrase that appears elsewhere. it speaks of a reverent awe before the God who works miracles whose works have been seen earlier in this chapter or elsewhere in the Bible.

But I think there's more emphasis here on throwing away. I doubt that we have physical gods in our house that we should go back and throw away or that somebody might.

it's much more likely that the things that we need to throw away are things like wrong ambitions. Ambitions whether they're at church or more likely at work where we want something for ourselves that may not be good for us or we want a better paid job that wouldn't actually enable us to serve the Lord better.

could be wrong relationships that lead us away from God it could be wrong habits misuse of our time or resources fear the Lord serve him with all faithfulness throw away the gods your ancestors worshipped.

you might be hoping we're getting near the end of the chapter but then there's this strange dialogue between Joshua and the people the people say we're up for this we're going to go for it we're going to serve the Lord and Joshua says verse 19 not able to serve the Lord he's a holy God he's a jealous God he will not forgive your rebellion and your sins because the problem is that Joshua fears what's going to come next and we know because we've read the book of Judges or at least looked at little bits of it that everything goes wrong very soon afterwards Judges 2 verse 10 says after that whole generation had been gathered to their ancestors another generation grew up who knew neither the Lord nor what he had done for Israel then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord and served the Baals

[25 : 07] Joshua knew that things might and could go wrong and Joshua also knew that he couldn't even make his contemporaries do serve the Lord he couldn't make the successors nor the contemporaries but he could start with himself he says if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve but as for me and my household we will serve the Lord it's a very famous verse isn't it it narrows it down a bit but perhaps it makes it almost harder we as for me and my household we will serve the

Lord starting with myself and then I have to take my household with me so that together we're all going to serve the Lord and that's the key response that we're called to tonight but of course Joshua is a leader and he wanted more than that verse 25 on that day Joshua made a covenant for the people and there at Shechem he reaffirmed for them decrees and laws and he recorded these things in the book of the law of God and as always he took a large stone and set it up there under the oak the leader makes a record and he puts up a stone to remind people in this church you might look at that memorial over there that memorial over there says that Archibald Campbell gave a sum of money to St Silas on certain terms and someone has made a record and put up a stone in an attempt to ensure

St Silas his evangelicalism into the future you can ask some quite complicated historical questions about that but the idea is remarkably striking a record and a stone and after Joshua's done all that at the end of verse 29 in verse 29 Joshua is given the title that Moses had he's called the servant of the Lord Joshua son of Nun the servant of the Lord isn't that a great description it's taken him right to the end of his life I think to get it whereas Moses has been described like that before but how appropriate it is that at the end as we come to the end of the story that this man Joshua the one under whose servant leadership a whole generation had been kept on track is given the title the servant of the Lord for in verse 31 Israel served the Lord throughout the lifetime of Joshua and of the elders who outlived him and who had experienced everything the Lord had done for Israel and then near the very end of the chapter we've got another reference to Shechem

Joseph's bones now how exciting is it that this morning we had reference to Joseph's bones at the end of Genesis and now here they are finally coming for burial five books later or whatever that is Joseph's bones which the Israelites had brought up from Egypt were buried at Shechem in the very tract of land that Jacob had bought it's all being tied together in some wonderful way for a hundred pieces of silver from the sons of Hamor the father of Shechem as we heard this morning Joseph had made his brothers promise to bring his bones back from Egypt to the land God had promised and now it's happened in fact it's very exciting because not only have God's promises been fulfilled but his people's promise has been fulfilled they promised that they would bring his bones back and now they have and then the final thought is that Eliezer who had been to Aaron as Joshua had been to Moses was buried too it really is the end of an era and almost the end of the sermon and in a way that is the end of the story it's a fuller end than we saw last week which wrapped up the book in a way but this is now wrapping up five and three quarter books or whatever it is but it's still an incomplete one the incompleteness is sort of shown I think in the fact that we talk about Joshua's death we talk about Eliezer's death we talk about Jacob's bones and we know that if we turn over a page that Joshua's work didn't completely last things went wrong we needed a Joshua who did not remain in the tomb we needed a Joshua who brings us grace and the spirit one who keeps promises works power gives protection and provision and still calls us to serve and to throw away and we thank God for Jesus who didn't remain in the tomb who brings us grace and the spirit but I've also missed something else as I was going through in verse 28 then Joshua dismissed the people each to their own inheritance that's what happens at the end of the time in [31 : 23] Shechem they're sent out they didn't stay there forever they didn't remain in this wonderful terrifying but exciting time of worship they went back home now you may be going home from St Silas at the end of a long term or a long year you may be going away from roots after the party on Wednesday you may be sad that your growth group has stopped for two months you may be sad that we're not meeting on a Sunday night for a month and a half you may be sad about those things but just as the Israelites took away from Shechem the reminder of God's grace the word through Joshua so you and I can take away from here tonight our knowledge of God's grace what we've learned about his character we can take with us our response we can take time to serve to worship so that we don't get led astray and I want tonight to close my sermon by saying the general thanksgiving from the prayer book together because I think it helps us in lots of ways it'll come up on the screen it'll help us to start with

God's grace and what he's done for us and then to seek to go forward to give up ourselves to God's service and to walk before him in holiness and righteousness tonight and into the holidays it'll come up on the screen we'll say it together Almighty God Father of all mercies we thine unworthy servants do give thee most humble and hearty thanks for all thy goodness and loving kindness to us and to all men we bless thee for our creation preservation and all the blessings of this life but above all for thine inestimable love in the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ for the means of grace and for the hope and for the hope of glory and we beseech thee give us that due sense of all thy mercies that our hearts may be unfailely thankful and that we show forth thy praise not only with our lips but in our lives by giving up ourselves to thy service and by walking before thee in holiness and righteousness all our days through Jesus Christ our Lord to whom with thee and the Holy Ghost be your honour and glory world without end Amen and now we're going to respond in