

Guest Preacher - Mr Donald Macaulay

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 10 September 2023

Preacher: Mr. Donald Macaulay

[0:00] Let's turn back then to the chapter that we read, the book of Joshua in chapter 24. I want to look particularly at the two things that Joshua says here in the second half of the chapter.

Particularly from verse 14 onwards, we can read there. Now therefore fear the Lord and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness. Put away the gods that your father 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. And at the end of that particular paragraph, but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.

And then to look at verse 19, particularly the reply that Joshua gives to the Israelites. You are not able to serve the Lord, for he is a holy God.

He is a jealous God. He will not forgive your transgressions or your sins. And perhaps cover some of the other aspects that we see in this particular section of the book of Joshua as well.

[1:25] The final chapter of the book of Joshua then is perhaps a retelling of what has gone on throughout the great part of the book itself.

We see in chapter 23 that Joshua has brought together the elders of Israel.

We see in chapter 23 in verse 2, Joshua summoned all Israel, its elders and heads, its judge and officers, and said to them, I am now old and well advanced in years, etc., etc.

And in the beginning of 24, Joshua gathered all the tribes. Now, most commentators think it doesn't mean that every single person in Israel came to Shechem here, but representatives again of the tribes.

But either interpretation is possible, although it's difficult to see how every single person in Israel would come. And it's fascinating that it is Shechem that Joshua chooses for this particular meeting.

[2:36] In essence, this meeting is a renewal of the covenant that God had made with Israel when he brought them out from Egypt.

But you'll notice that there are none of the usual signs of covenant renewal here. There is no sacrifice.

There's no appearance of the presence of God. There's no thunder and lightnings like there was at Mount Sinai and so on. And the tabernacle is not here at Shechem at this time, as far as we understand.

The tabernacle is already at Shiloh, and that's where we see it later on at the beginning of Samuel and throughout the book of Judges and so on. There are some commentators who maintain that the tabernacle was at Shechem, but there's no absolute evidence for that in Scripture itself.

Why Shechem, then? That's a very interesting question. Why does the meeting take place at Shechem? And if you go back, particularly into the book of Genesis, you find that Shechem is a particularly significant place in the history of the children of Israel.

[3:59] Joshua summarizes that history in the first section up to verse 13 of the chapter, but he doesn't tell us all the various things that had happened at Shechem, and I'm not going to tell you them all either, because it would be a good exercise for you to go through and see, particularly in the book of Genesis, how many significant things take place at Shechem.

I'll mention one or two to you. Abraham built an altar there, and you'll find that in Genesis 12. Jacob also built an altar there, and you'll find that in Genesis 33.

It's a city of refuge. I'm not going to tell you where you find that. You can find it yourself. It's quite easy to find. Joseph is about to be buried there, the bones of Joseph.

We see in verse 32, for the bones of Joseph, which the people of Israel brought up from Egypt, they buried them at Shechem. And one other significant thing.

Jacob had buried his idols under an oak tree. Now, whether it's the same oak tree that is mentioned here, it probably is. That you can sort of meditate upon yourself.

[5:21] And there are other things that take place at Shechem, which are also very noteworthy. But yet, there is no mention of the tabernacle being there at all.

But it is a significant place in the history of the children of Israel. And it's that history that Joshua recounts to the people as he is instructed by God.

Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel. And he goes through the history of the children of Israel up until the present time.

And you notice, of course, that the emphasis is on the fact that it is God who has done the work, not the children of Israel themselves.

And each single thing that is mentioned there, as you go back in the history of Israel, you can see the presence of the God of Israel in the various things that are done.

[6:28] And so we come to this defining point. The renewal of the covenant with the Lord. Now, therefore, fear the Lord and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness.

Put away the gods that your father served beyond the river and in Egypt. That's the Euphrates. And in Egypt. And serve the Lord. And it's interesting that Joshua feels it necessary to remind them to put away these gods.

Does this mean that he knew that the people still carried out some form of idol worship? Even as they are about, even as they have already entered the promised land.

And that's something that should make you and I think. Put away the gods that your father served beyond the river and in Egypt and serve the Lord.

Now, it would be easy for us to spend a considerable amount of time thinking of what that means. Idol worship. You and I, of course, will come to the point where we say, well, we don't serve idols in that particular way.

[7:49] No, you don't. But you serve other idols. You and I are just as guilty of idol worship in one sense as the Israelites were.

Maybe our idols were not copies of what was seen in Egypt or seen in the land of Ur. Not sort of carved images or wooden things or anything else.

And you remember how quickly that had taken place. You remember Aaron making a golden calf for the people after the worship and the figures that had been seen in Egypt.

And it would seem that this idea of idol worship is still present among the people. although outwardly they serve the Lord.

Nevertheless, Joshua is told that the words that he speaks are words that God gives him to speak to the tribes. Put away the gods.

[8:57] Choose this day whom you will serve. Now, it's a very famous text. Choose this day whom you will serve. And we'll come to meditate on a minute or two what serve actually means there.

But perhaps a word, first of all, on our idols. Perhaps you think, you and I both think, that we are not guilty of idol worship.

Well, here's a very simple question to test. How many of us will rush home or rush to our cars or have a quick look on the phone immediately after the service to see what the score in the rugby was?

The God of sport has become all pervasive throughout our land. And if it's not rugby, it's something else. There's nothing wrong with sport in the right place.

But when it takes the place of honoring God, then it becomes an idol. And there are so many other things that can easily do exactly the same thing.

[10:14] How often do you and I bow to the idol that is self?
 Self-worship, self-praise, self-honor, self-confidence, self-this, self-that.

Don't hear it as much now as we used to in the last five or six years ago. It seems to have run its cycle. But the idea of self, I am able to do all things myself. Nothing is impossible with me, et cetera, et cetera. The idea of self seemed to be becoming an idol for so many people.

I don't need to mention many others. Pride, of course, is one of our favorite idols. Self-pride. Even the pride that we have in so many other things.

And perhaps sometimes it's such a hidden, devious form of pride. Oh, I have pride in my children, my children's achievements. Is that a legitimate pride?

[11:17] Of course it is in many ways. I have pride in my family, et cetera, and so on. But when it begins to take the place of worshipping the Lord, and it becomes more important than worshipping the Lord, then it becomes, and it can become, an idol.

And each one of us will have our own personal idols. I don't know what yours are. I know what mine are. I'm not telling you, because that would make me very ashamed to confess in public what my idols are, but I know what they are.

And each one of us will have that struggle. Choose this day whom you will serve. And what does it mean by serving here?

The majority of people seem to think that service to God is doing things. We have to be doing this, that, and the next thing.

Running about, organizing meetings, doing this, that, and the next thing, and being involved in as many possible activities as we can. That's not the meaning of serve here at all.

[12:36] There's nothing wrong with all these activities, but we have to be very careful, very careful that they do not become the focus rather than the means.

Sometimes we get so involved in doing things that we forget why we are actually doing them. So what does serve mean?

Choose this day whom you will serve. Well, I was going to say in its simplest, it means worship, but there's nothing simple about worship.

When you consider how you and I should worship God, then there is nothing simple about that. Did you come here this evening to worship?

Or did you come for a different reason? Perhaps some of the younger ones, and again I make no excuses for saying this, you had no choice, you were dragged along.

[13:46] And that's good. And that's good. There will come a time where you will make your own choice. Choose this day. Isn't life full of choices?

How many choices do you make in the course of a particular day? The theologians will ask the question, and I'm sure some of you are wondering about the question here, choose this day. Are you responsible for your own choice of worship? Of course you are. Man's responsibility lies in making decisions.

And I'm not going to go into all the arguments about election and all the rest of it. That's not the point. The point is that you and I have been given brains, and these brains are capable of making choices.

How many choices did you make in the course of today? Already. Think of them. Dozens of them. From the moment you decided what you were going to wear to church, et cetera, and so on.

[14:59] Or even whether you were going to come to church. You have been making choices all day. But Joshua's choice here, Joshua's much more focused.

Choose this day whom you will serve. Whether the idols you will serve or the Lord God. What do you put first in your life?

That's what the choice is all about. And you notice how he concludes this section. As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.

Now, there's a lesson there to the heads of households. As for me and my house, it's not just an individual responsibility, responsibility.

But as parents and as heads of households, we have a responsibility to teach and to train up the rest of the people that are in our household.

[16:10] And it's not just necessarily children, but others perhaps as well. We will serve the Lord. We will worship the Lord. God. And we'll come to consider in a moment in the second part of his answer, how exactly do we worship God?

How can we worship God? the people say, far be from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods, etc., etc., etc.

And then, therefore, we also will serve the Lord, for he is our God. And it would seem that if you read that passage, that they're saying they will serve God because of what he's done for them. Is that the reason that you are serving God as well, that you worship God because of what he's done for you? And I can hear you thinking, well, it should be.

Why? What has he done for you? Now, there are dozens of answers that you could give to that question.

[17:26] But the most important one that he's done for you is the provision of the rock. We'll come back to that in a minute. This is what Joshua does at Shechem in verse 25.

Joshua made a covenant with the people that day and put in place statutes and rules for them at Shechem. And Joshua wrote these words in the book of the law of God and he took a large stone and set it up there under the terebinth or the oak that was by the sanctuary of the Lord.

Now it appears that this sanctuary here, some say that this is the tabernacle. Others maintain that it is simply the oak tree that marked the various spots where things that I've already mentioned had been taking place.

But this habit of commemorating a particular place with memorial stones is very, very common throughout the book of Joshua. Nine times, boys and girls, nine times in the book of Joshua there are memorial stones set up.

We are familiar with memorials, of course. Memorials are set up for all sorts of things and the one that comes to mind immediately are war memorials. But you'll find that almost all the memorials that we find in the Old Testament commemorate particular acts of the Lord in which things happened that couldn't have happened without divine intervention.

[19:08] But this is different. This is a marker. This stone, verse 27, Joshua said to all the people, this stone shall be a witness against us.

But it has heard all the words of the Lord that he spoke to us. Therefore it shall be a witness against you, lest you deal falsely with your God.

How can a stone hear? Of course, it's a figure of speech that's being used. There's a stone as a witness, but it's the stone that reminds us that God hears.

God is a witness. This stone shall be a witness against us. Isn't that exactly what the people said when Pilate asked them what they were going to do with Jesus?

Crucify him, crucify him. And what did he say? He said he washed his hands and said the blood of this man.

[20:20] I am innocent of it. And the people say it is upon us. It's the same thing here. We are witnesses. You don't have to go very far into the book of Judges.

In Joshua chapter 2, in the book of Judges chapter 2, you find laid out for us very clearly what happens. Chapter 2 in Judges and verse 11, the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and served the Baals.

After that generation, verse 10, all that generation, that is those that had come with Joshua and others through the wilderness, once they had died, there arose another generation after them who did not know the Lord or the work that he had done for Israel.

in one generation, the worship of God almost disappears. And as you go through the book of Judges, you find the same thing happening over and over again.

And it's not until we come into the book of Samuel that we find, as Samuel is raised as a prophet, that Samuel is raised up to maintain the worship of God constantly.

[21:44] And it's in chapter 7 in 1 Samuel that we find this famous stone, the Ebenezer stone. Are you listening, boys and girls?

1 Samuel chapter 7, verse 12. Samuel took a stone and set it up between Misbe and Shennah and called its name Ebenezer, for he said, till now the Lord has helped us.

What's the meaning of Ebenezer? Till now the Lord helps. It's a stone of help. And this was the idea of the stones, that they were memorials to help us to remember.

That's what the war memorials are in the same way as well, to help us remember. So there's your third question, and you should have all your questions complete now.

How many stones are set up in the book of Joshua? How old was Joshua when he died? We've got that at the end of the chapter.

[22:57] And then finally, the Ebenezer stone. We used to hear that in Gaelic in the prayer so often. Talk of our Nebenezer Gachwa.

But we don't hear it anymore. Very rarely hear it in prayer now being mentioned. To lift up, seeking help, your help stone from the Lord.

But to come back a little bit, it's interesting, Joshua's reply to the people in verse 19. Joshua said to the people, you are not able to serve the Lord for he is a holy God, he is a jealous God, he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins.

Now, there's nothing perhaps there outwardly that we don't understand. Or is there? You are not able to serve the Lord.

And think here that instead of speaking, Joshua speaking to the people, that this is being spoken to you and I this evening. You are not able to serve the Lord for he is a holy God.

[24:18] Do you ever spend time meditating or thinking about the holiness of God? what does it mean? The holiness of God.

If you go to the original Hebrew, what you find here is that the word that is used generally for holy means separated.

The holy things of the tabernacle, the temple, etc. were separated. That is put aside for a particular purpose. sanctify as well and the process of sanctification.

The Lord's people are set aside for a particular purpose. The purpose, of course, is that they will come eventually to a full sanctification as they enter glory.

And again, we could go into that in great detail. But the meaning of holy here is something different. He's a holy God.

[25:30] R.C. Sproul has a very interesting book called The Holiness of God, which I would thoroughly recommend that you read. If you can get a hold of it, it's very easy to read.

But he starts off one particular chapter by saying, it is impossible to explain the holiness of God. There is no way that you and I can understand what God's holiness actually means. We have an idea of holiness.

We say quite often, oh, such and such is such a holy person. But if you said that to that person themselves, they would be the first to tell you that that is far from the truth.

Why? Because you and I cannot see what is going on in their minds. Aren't you glad this evening that nobody knows what goes on in your mind at times.

[26:44] How ashamed you would be if others could see into the depth of your mind. And I can hear you saying in your defense, well, I'm only human.

True, but that's still not a defense. And even if you were totally holy in your mind, you are still guilty of original sin.

The sin that came with Adam. And therefore, if God's holiness is on a totally different level, how can you and I approach such a holy God?

It's an awesome thought when you begin to think of it in depth. the holiness of God and how you and I can have access to that holiness.

But you're told in the New Testament to come boldly to the throne of Christ. How can you do that? Well, you can only do it because of the way that was opened up.

[28:02] what the most holy place in the tabernacle signified. What was to come? The blood that was shed once a year on the day of atonement for the sins of the high priest and the people, everything that pointed us forward to the cross of Calvary.

Calvary. And it is through the blood that is shed at Calvary that you and I have access to a holy God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

That the full access to the Trinity is granted to us through that blood. Why? Because that blood cleanses away the sins of those who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.

And you and I are here as sinners this evening, sinners in the presence of a holy God. And yet the only reason that we are able to come before him and to worship is because of the blood that cleanses from all sin.

That was the significance of the atonement. That was the significance of what the high priest did, pointing forward to the cross and then as we read in the New Testament that the curtain in the temple is ripped from top to bottom.

[29:43] And notice it's from top to bottom, not the other way up. and some of the old theologians used to maintain that this was impossible for human hands to have done because the curtain was about a meter thick.

Impossible. But it's God who carries out the action, not man, showing that the access to the holy of holies is now open through the blood of the cross.

Choose this day who you will serve. That was the original question that Joshua gave us. If it is evil in your eyes to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve.

And the decision still lies before us each and every day. How we serve, how we worship, how we come and worship, how we deal with our responsibility as head of a household, to the children, to others in our house, how we teach them and train.

It's also your responsibility to make a decision to serve the Lord. But you notice he is a jealous God.

[31:15] God. You are not able to serve the Lord for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God. He will not forgive your transgressions or your sins.

Now, jealous here does not mean envious in the way that we think of the word jealous nowadays, jealous of so-and-so, etc., but jealous in the sense that he will not permit any competition. competition. That's what it means in its original form. There is no competition with God. There is no other God. Scripture makes that clear to us.

But nevertheless, we are surrounded by our idols. And the stone is a witness against you, lest you deal falsely with your God.

God. And it's interesting, isn't it, that the same symbolism is used for the Lord Jesus Christ, that he is the rock on which this church will be built.

[32:25] That's what Jesus says to Peter, on this rock I shall build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

So where is your choice? this morning, this morning, this evening? Where is your choice this evening? Have you chosen who you're going to serve?

But be very careful and bear something else in mind. Paul says to us in Ephesians 2, when he's speaking about us coming to faith, he says in verse 8, by grace you have been saved through faith, this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

It's not about doing, the service is not about doing, it's about faith. Where is your faith this evening? I'll leave you with this as a final question.

Where do you place your faith this evening? do you place it in the God of Israel, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the chosen people, one might say the elect people of the Lord from the beginning.

[33:51] And yet we see as we look through the history of Israel how many times they fell in spite of being the elect people. people of God, and you and I have to be equally careful.

It is by faith, and it is our faith that produces our works. But the faith is the most important thing. On whom is your faith based this evening?

Is it based on yourself, your own abilities, the decisions that you make? Or is it based firmly and squarely, as we heard so much this morning, on the rock that is the Lord Jesus Christ, the solid foundation that is there?

And if it's not, then I have one final question for you. When you come to meet your God, what answer will you give to the question, on whom did you base your faith?

Some will have no answer at all. But you and I should be able to say that our faith is on the Lord Jesus Christ alone.

[35:13] That we sin daily in thought, word, and deed, but we don't depend on ourselves. And aren't we glad that we don't? We depend exclusively on the finished work of Calvary.

That's why he calls out on the cross, it is finished. The work is finished. And if your faith is not based on the cross of Calvary, then I don't need to tell you that you're in a very perilous position.

May the Lord bless these few thoughts to us. Let us pray. Our Father in Heaven, we thank you that we can meditate on these things, things even that come to the depth of knowledge about the attributes of God.

We thank you for your holiness, that it is above our comprehension. But we thank you that you're the holy God who listens to the prayers of your people, and that the prayers of your people rise as incense round about your throne.

But we thank you that there is a mediator there, even in the same way as Joshua mediated into the renewal of the covenant at Shechem, that there is a mediator before the throne to help us in our daily prayers and our daily worship.

[36:40] For without that, we would have nothing. And we are reminded so often, as Jesus said, that without me, you can do nothing. We pray that you would bless us now as we come to conclude our worship and pardon sin through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Let us conclude then by singing verses in Psalm 98. On page 360, Psalm 98. We'll sing the verses marked 1 to 4.

Oh, sing a new song to the Lord, for wonders he hath done, his right hand and his holy arm, him victory hath won. And we'll sing down to the bottom of the page to verse 4.

Let all the earth unto the Lord send forth a joyful noise. Lift up your voice aloud to him. Sing praises and rejoice. Psalm 98. Oh, sing a new song to the Lord.

Oh, sing a new song to the Lord, for wonders he hath done.

[37:58] His right hand and his holy arm in victory hath won.

The Lord God his salvation hath caused it to be known.

His justice in the heathen side he opened me he opened me as shown.

He mindful of his grace and truth to Israel's house hath been.

and the salvation of our God all ends of the earth have seen.

[39:21] Let all the earth unto the Lord send forth the joyful noise.

Lift up your voice aloud to him. Sing praises and rejoice.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all now and forever. Amen.