

Why It's Not Working

3-Year Bible Reading Plan

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This morning, I want to encourage you to open your Bibles to one of the most popular Scriptures in all of the Bible, the book of Joshua 24. You say, "Well, how do you know this is one of the most popular passages in all of the Bible?" Because almost every single home of a believer that I walk into has a verse from Joshua 24 inscribed somewhere, either on a plaque, on a picture, on a stone outside. This is the chapter that has that famous verse, "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

Now that's an important verse and we're gonna go there in just a few moments, but before we do so, I think it's important to understand the context of Joshua 24. First and foremost is this: the Israelites have inhabited the Promised Land but not to the fullest of its capacity. It was Moses that led them out of Egypt. It was Moses that took them across the Red Sea. It was Moses that guided them in the wilderness. But as we saw back in chapter 1, it was Joshua who led the Israelites across the Jordan River. It was Joshua that led them around Jericho. It was Joshua that led them around the city of Ai. And it was Joshua who led them to defeat over 30 of their enemies up until this point. The Promised Land is inhabited but it is not completed. So the verse that we're about to read, the passage that we're about to read isn't so much about what's been in the past but what is about to lie ahead in the future.

The second point of context that I want to share with you today is very critical to our culture, is that when Joshua gives these words he's 110 years old. Now that means several things. 1. I don't know anybody here who is 110 yet so you've still got some time to get with it. 2. We live in a culture today that over-accentuates youth. You don't believe me, just look at the billboards promising that if we will shell out some money, they can make us look younger. You know, that's very contrary to what the Bible says. Here's what our culture says: listen to the words of youth; look like youth; appear. In fact, we have a problem in our culture and I'm not gonna preach on this but I want to, we have a problem called prolonged adolescence. In other words, we want to stay young as long as humanly possible. You know that's not God's perspective. You know what he says throughout the Scripture? Our desire should be the elders who sit at the gate, the ones who have the wisdom of the ages. And here is Joshua, having led them through over 30 campaigns of victory, here is Joshua 110 years of age, he's been on Mount Sinai, he's been through the Red Sea, he's been through the Jordan River and he's about to give some advice.

The third point of context is this, verse 15 that oftentimes is displayed in our homes, cannot just simply be extracted from the text, we have to see what's on the front side and what's on the backside, which leads us to verse 13 of Joshua 24. It says,

13 And I have given you a land for which ye did not labour, and cities which ye built not, and ye dwell in them; of the vineyards and oliveyards which ye planted not do ye eat. 14 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. 15 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. 16 And the people answered and said, God forbid that we should forsake the LORD, to serve other gods; 17 For the LORD our God, he it is that brought us up and our fathers out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage, and which did those great signs in our sight, and preserved us in all the way wherein we went, and among all the people through whom we passed: 18 And the LORD drove out from before us all the people, even the Amorites which dwelt in the land: therefore will we also serve the LORD; for he is our God.

I want you all to listen to the great pastoral wisdom of verse 19,

19 And Joshua said unto the people, Ye cannot serve the LORD: for he is an holy God; he is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions nor your sins. 20 If ye forsake the LORD, and serve strange gods, then he will turn and do you hurt, and consume you, after that he hath done you good. 21 And the people said unto Joshua, Nay; but we will serve the LORD. 22 And Joshua said unto the people, Ye are witnesses against yourselves that ye have chosen you the LORD, to serve him. And they said, We are witnesses. 23 Now therefore put away, said he, the strange gods which are among you, and incline your heart unto the LORD God of Israel. 24 And the people said unto Joshua, The LORD our God will we serve, and his voice will we obey.

Though verse 15 of this passage is the most famous, I want to take you back to verse 19. Why is it that Joshua at 110 years of age, having seen what he had seen and heard what he heard, why would he look at these people and say, "I've got bad news for you, but it's not gonna work out. You cannot serve the Lord." Now in a day of much, shall we say, optimistic and positive preaching, this wouldn't fly in our context very well, would it, because three times they said, "We'll serve the Lord," but not one single time did they say, "and we will put away the gods." You see, the thing that Joshua brought up is that for this thing called life to work out the way it's designed to, it's not enough just to say, "God, I want to serve you." What did Jesus say in Matthew 6? "You cannot serve both

God and mammon. You will love one and you will hate the other." The promise of verse 15, "For we choose to serve the Lord," is actually twofold, we must put away the gods and we must serve the Lord with fear and sincerity. Three times they said, "Oh, we will serve the Lord," but not one time did they say, "We'll turn away from our gods."

So today I want to address a very important issue because the book of Joshua, it's metaphorical for us as believers, it's the story of our lives coming out of the bondage of sin into the Promised Land of a relationship with Jesus Christ, and I want to answer a very difficult question that I know we ask on a regular basis: why is it not working out? How many times have you cried out to the Lord above, how many times have you wept tears on the floor and said, "God, I don't understand. I love you with everything I've got, I'm passionate about you, I want to serve you, why does it look the way it does?" You realize that really was the prayer of the Israelites all through the book of Judges, they had a heart to serve, they had a heart to love but they were never willing to forsake their gods.

So today I want to walk through this passage and I want to deal with these items of concern, I want to deal with these false gods. Because you and I live in the 21st century, we live in the Western world and not regularly at least, do we see, observe or participate in somebody bowing down to a rock or a molten image like we see in the Old Testament or even that's alluded to in this passage. I've been in the Eastern world and I've actually seen that take place but in our world, we oftentimes don't bow down to that which we've constructed in our own hands but that which we've constructed in our own minds.

What is a false god? Allow me to define a false god not only in your life and my life but all of our lives, by describing it with this metric, that God, and I'm gonna use that in a generic term, is that which deserves our best time, our greatest talents, and our first dollar. Now let me unpack that for just a moment because we should serve the one true God through his Son Jesus Christ but how many times are we guilty of serving false gods who get our best time, our best talent, and our first resources? Let me unpack that real quick. I said best time, not most time. This isn't an issue of quantity, this is an issue of quality.

Let me demonstrate in our home. I'm a night owl, for those of you who do not know. When everybody else goes to bed, I'm just getting my second wind. That's my best time of the day. My wife is an early bird. We have a great marriage, I go to bed, she gets up. It's wonderful how it works. That being said, if I were to stand before you today and say, "You know what? If you really love the Lord, then you would pray and study your Bible at 3:30 in the morning." At 3:30 in the morning I'm snoring, I don't know about you, but half the time my wife's already up. What if I told you, "You know, if you really love the Lord, you'd stay up until midnight." Well, some of you go, "Man, by 9 o'clock I'm out." It's not the time, it's the best time. How many times are you so exhausted from life that whatever time you give the Lord isn't worth giving?

You see, our God is that which we give our best time to. At night when everybody goes to bed, that's my time with the Lord. That's my best time. I'm not distracted by the phone, the tv, conversation. It's just me and the Lord. That's my best time. Maybe your best time

is in the morning, maybe your best time's at lunch. I don't know what it is but whatever our God is, we give that God our best time. We also give him our best talents or resources. How many times are we so exhausted from going through life that when it comes to something the Lord has for us, we just don't have the energy because we've exhausted ourselves on other matters? How about our finances? Larry Burkett, the founder of Crown Financial Ministry used to say before his untimely death, he said, "You know, you can always tell a man's god by looking at his checkbook." Now I know that's an antiquated term with today's digital world but what he meant is simply this: it's not how much, it's when it is given. You see, when you talk about a false god in our life, it's that which gets our best time, gets our best resources of life, and gets our first dollar.

Now every single one of us in the room today, every one listening today has been guilty at one point of giving somebody other than God all those things. It may be one out of the three, two out of the three, or it's sometimes all three of the three, and it says when you do so, that he says put away these gods that are on the other side of the flood and in Egypt and in the Amorites. Now understand, everything that I just shared with you is exactly what took place in that context and I want to walk through this very quickly.

What were the gods on the other side of the flood? Let's go back to Genesis 3. Do you know what the god was there? It was the god of reason. "It's reasonable. This makes sense. If I eat of the forbidden fruit, it looks good, it should taste good, and it's going to make me wise as the gods." How did it all start out? In verse 1 of chapter 3 the serpent asked Eve, "Yea, hath God said." It always starts when we put something or somebody that is contrary to the word of God above the word of God and that's exactly what happened, and they began to reason with themselves that it just made perfect sense, they knew better than God. You see, when we give something other than the Lord our best, what we're doing is we're reasoning that surely it deserves our attention more than the Lord does. We're following the gods on the other side of the flood.

But how about the gods right before the flood? Genesis 6, the Bible says that the sons of God and the daughters of men were engaging in all kinds of illicit practices, so much so that everyone's thoughts were only wicked. We know at the end of Noah's flood that it was Noah, Mrs. Noah, three sons, three wives, eight people total that were "saved" on that boat, but they had moved from the god of reason to the god of rationalization. In fact, you get to Matthew 24 and Jesus says in the last days it'll be just like the days of Noah. I mean, think about it for a moment, for 120 years Noah builds a boat, declaring something they'd never seen is going to take place for 40 days and 40 nights. For 120 years he says, "You're about to get wet from above, not below. You'd better get on the boat." They rationalized, "Surely this can't be what's really true. Surely this can't be the best decision." Until the door closed and the rain descended, they had rationalized that they knew better than God did.

But then we get to Egypt. Oh, when we get to Egypt, do you know what happened there? We didn't just reason, we didn't just rationalize, humanity began the process of replacing God. In fact, if you walk through all of the 10 plagues of Egypt, one of the things that you will discover is simply this, that every god of the Egyptians was, shall we say, one-upped

by God in regards to his aspects, whether it be the reverence and the veneration of the river Nile, the frogs, the lice, the darkness, whatever it may be, what had humanity done? We had so reasoned and so rationalized, we actually replaced God with that which could be formed with our hands and seen with our eyes and touched with our fingers. Oh, we're good at this, aren't we? You see, what we do is we take our time and our attention and our resources and we devote it to that which we can touch, we devote it to that which we can observe. It may be a physical object, it may be a passion, it may be a desire, it may be a career path, it may be a goal, it may be success, whatever it may be, we replace that aspiration with where the Lord should be in our lives.

But interesting, it ends with the gods of the Amorites in verse 18. I don't expect you to know a whole lot about the Amorites but let me share with you this one unique aspect about them: they were a fertility cult. You say, "What is that?" They were obsessed with sensuality. They were obsessed with physicality. They believed that their life in the now and their life in the future was based on the pure procreation of humanity. If we haven't been a culture obsessed with the sensual, I don't know what we can call our culture today.

You see, the interesting thing is our culture has walked the path of humanity like every other culture and oftentimes we as individuals do the same thing, we begin to reason that surely the Bible doesn't know what it's talking about, we rationalize, "God, this is the best thing for me because I know what I'm doing," then we take whatever that is, we replace God with it and before long whether it's here or Romans 1, it always ends up in the flesh and in the sensual. These are the items that are of concern and false gods, they creep up in our lives so easily, but I want you to notice back in verse 14 the clear instructions: put them away. Put them away. There is no better way to say that than get rid of them.

Now I want you to understand what this means because this is not the American idea of putting away. Did you know statistically upwards of 40% of Americans have storage facilities outside of their house to store stuff? That's not what it's talking about. This doesn't mean go put it off site just in the event that you might want to tap into it one day. You know, our culture today has a phenomena. Now if you are prone to appreciate this, please understand my wife appreciates this. I love my wife, I love you, it's okay, but our culture does garage sales. I don't understand why anybody would want to wake up before the sun and buy something nobody else wants. Have you thought about that for just a moment? A garage sale is you buying stuff that somebody else now considers junk or something they don't need anymore, and what do we do? We typically take that stuff which we really don't need and eventually it ends up in the attic, it ends up in the basement or the storage shed.

Why is this significant? Because what we do in our culture in acquiring stuff is if we know we don't really need it right now, we put it to the side just in the event that we would. Some of you have got clothes you haven't worn in three decades but you might get back to that size. Some of you have got items, precious things of years gone by and say, "Well, there might be a chance one day." He says put them away. What does that mean? In our economy it means have a fire sale, it means get rid of it all. And it's not just the amount, it's the quality thereof. When you get to the book of Isaiah 30, there's this

great passage where the Lord's giving the Israelites direction and here's what he says, "When I whisper in your ear go to the right, go to the right. When I whisper in your ear go to the left, go to the left." And then after he gives them directions, he says, "And take the garbage of your life and remove it from your presence."

Now I want you to think about that for just a moment because we're dealing with false gods here. You know there's levels of garbage in our home, right? You may not realize that but there is. You take a packaging of plastic or paper and such and you just, you put it in the trash can and it eventually gets full and you take it to the curb or whatever process you utilize, have you ever had one of those moments where there was something that was of such ill repute that you took it, you wrapped it in a Walmart bag, you put it in a paper sack, you put it in the trash and you immediately locked it up and you put it outside because you did not want it anywhere in your house for that which it might attract or odors it might dispel? That's exactly what he is saying just like in Isaiah 30, when he says put away the gods, don't leave it until trash day. Don't put it in the attic because one day you might need it. He's saying if there is stuff that has become more important to you than the Lord himself, put it out. Get away. Remove it. That's why Jesus said in Matthew 6, "Seek first the kingdom of God and all these things will be added unto you." It's very clear instructions. He doesn't say play around with it. He doesn't say save it for later. He says put it away.

Then last but not least is the issue of concern, verse 15. This is that famous verse we put in our house. It says, "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." Here's the real issue: you must make a decision, it requires a choice, it says, "Choose this day whom you will serve, the God of the universe or that which is worthy of garbage; the God of eternity or the stuff of temporal earth." Choose this day.

You know, some years ago, in fact it's becoming more and more days of distant past when I was a student in the college world, I was part of an organization and that organization every year we had an annual retreat where we gathered together. You know, it's a scary thought when you take 75-100 college guys and you put them all in one location but nonetheless that's what we did. And we had a practice that we did every year before the school year started. What they would do is they would gather everybody up in one large room and it was just a huge circle, and they would put a chair in the middle of the room and one by one in alphabetical order, everybody would sit in that chair. There are two things that took place when you sat in that chair. The first thing was that three people from the crowd had the opportunity to verbally communicate to you that which they appreciated about you or the value you brought to their life or to the organization. It was designed to be a time of encouragement. But once they were done, just three people could speak because it's a large group, they set the stopwatch, you had 30 seconds to say anything you wanted to the group at large. Anything. Now this was your opportunity to put it up and tee it off, if you wanted to, because there was no rebuttal. This was your chance to say that you were disappointed. This was your chance to say you were

frustrated. This was your chance to say whatever you wanted. And I'll never forget one year, a dear friend of mine was in that chair and I'm just gonna tell you exactly what he said and then I'm gonna relate it to your lives as well. He said, "Gentlemen," he said, "I've got a Bible in one hand and a beer in the other and I can't tell you which one I'm gonna choose." And he walked off the chair.

Now that may not be your issue but take your false god and put it there. I've got a Bible in one hand, I've got my career in the other. I've got my Bible in one hand, and my reputation in the other. I've got the Bible in one hand, and my desires in the other. Let me ask you which one are you going to choose? We don't have the privilege of choosing both. You see, sometimes when we ask the question, "Why is it not working out?" It's because we've chosen the other rather than the Lord. Joshua said you can't have both. Choose you this day whom you will serve. In just a few moments, we're gonna walk out and it can't be both. It's gotta be one or the other.