

Joshua 24

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[0 : 0 0] On Friday, we celebrated 21 years of marriage. Say we, that would be me and Martha for the avoidance of doubt. And in the context of that, somebody who shall remain nameless posed the question, what's the secret? Now, I know there are many here who have, I won't say survived, but have thrived many more years than 21. But nonetheless, that question was posed.

Now, I don't think there is a secret, but certainly what is fundamental is the mutual recognition that marriage is a lifelong covenant grounded in solemn vows that are to be kept in good times and bad. And when there is that recognition, there is there surely a great bulwark and foundation for a marriage. Marriage vows are not just words that sound nice during a ceremony. They may well be words that sound nice during a ceremony, but they are much more than just nice words.

They provide both a foundation for and boundaries around the fledgling and vulnerable marriage that begins with these selfsame vows. And I wonder if a greater place might not be given to the renewing of vows. That's something that you sometimes hear of, perhaps in other traditions. We certainly do need to be reminded not only of the content of our vows, but of the serious commitment that they represent.

And here I continue to speak about marriage as we begin. We'll move on to another matter in a moment. Just recently, I was looking at the website of the church where I was a pastor before coming to Bonacord in Moyabamba. And at the end of last year, they were celebrating their anniversary celebrations, as is their custom. And as part of the program, there was one service where several couples renewed their marriage vows. I don't know if there would be any volunteers if we were to organize such a ceremony here in Bonacord. But what of another solemn covenant that we are party to as believers?

What of our covenant commitment to and with the Lord God? Is there a place for renewing our vows, or of renewing our loyalty to the Lord? Well, it is most certainly a biblical practice to renew a people's commitment, indeed an individual's commitment to God. In the Old Testament, there are a number of occasions when God's covenant was renewed, when in a formal and very deliberate way, the people renewed their commitment to God. They had made a commitment in the past, but it was seen as necessary and helpful and fitting that there be a renewal of that commitment. This was the case at a national level on significant occasions in the history of the nation. We've read of one such occasion this morning, and we're going to be turning to that in a moment. But this renewal of commitment to the Lord was also something that was engaged in in the homes of the Israelites, in the individual households, and very particular when Israelites celebrated the Passover. The Passover was, in a very real way, a form of annual covenant renewal, where a household recommitted itself to loyalty and service of God. And what of the New

[4 : 17] Testament as we move into the New Testament? Well, certainly the need for renewal or reaffirmation or rededication is as marked as ever, and provision is made for this in different ways. It could be argued that our gathering on the Lord's Day to worship as we do this morning, to worship our covenant-keeping God is a form, certainly an opportunity for covenant renewal. But perhaps especially the Lord's Supper that has taken the place of the place of the Passover is explicitly a sacrament of covenant renewal. It is a time when we renew our commitment to the Lord. And next Sunday morning, we will have that opportunity to participate, and it's very fitting that at the beginning of a new year, such an opportunity is provided for us.

Well, this morning I want to reflect on this matter of covenant renewal. And my purpose is to give us an opportunity to examine ourselves in this matter of our loyalty to the Lord, and also the opportunity to rededicate ourselves to His service. And we will do this in the light of what we can learn from the passage that we read in Joshua chapter 24. To give us just very briefly a little bit of the historical background to this ceremony of covenant renewal recorded for us in Joshua at the end of the book, we're told in verse 29 of the chapter that after these things, that is, after this ceremony that took place, after these things, Joshua, son of Nun, the servant of the Lord, died at the age of 110.

So that immediately gives us a pointer as to when this took place. Now, while we can't know for certain the time that elapsed between the ceremony that we read of at the beginning or in the main body of the chapter, the time that elapsed between that and Joshua's death, the impression given is that it was very soon after. Joshua himself, as he begins his address to the people and in the language he himself uses, is very much suggesting that his expectation was that he was to die very soon, and everything would indicate that that is what happened. This ceremony took place, and soon after—how long exactly, we don't know—but soon after, Joshua died. Now, that would suggest that this ceremony took place between twenty and thirty years after the conquest. Remember, we were saying to the children that Joshua was used of God to conquer the promised land. Well, after that conquest had been secured, this ceremony takes place twenty to thirty years later. And we can come up with that timescale by reference to what we know of Joshua's good friend and fellow spy, Caleb. You see, if Joshua were not given specific details as to his age at the time of the conquest or at the time of him being called by Moses, by God through Moses, but of Caleb, we do have that information. We won't look at all the details, but in chapter fourteen, we can find, if you're interested, you can find there what Caleb himself says about his age. And Caleb certainly says that he was forty at the time of the Exodus. Now, we know the Exodus was forty years, so at the time of the conquest, Caleb would have been about eighty. Now, it seems reasonable to assume that

Joshua was at a similar age. And so, if Joshua died at a hundred and ten, well, you can do the maths. We're talking about twenty to thirty years after the conquest that this ceremony of covenant renewal takes place. So, it's not to be confused with a ceremony of covenant renewal that took place at the time of the conquest. Another very suitable time for such a ceremony. No, this is later on. Years have passed. Indeed, in the passage itself, we're given significant indications in this regard. There in chapter twenty-three, at the very beginning of chapter twenty-three, we read, "After a long time had passed, and the Lord had given Israel rest from all their enemies around them, Joshua, by then old and well advanced in years, summoned all Israel." A long time had passed. As I'm suggesting, twenty, twenty-five, thirty years, something of that order. This is when this ceremony takes place. And it was very important, given the time that had passed, given that a new generation was emerging, it was important that that new generation, certainly those under forty years of age, who wouldn't have participated in that previous ceremony of covenant renewal, or in any case, their memories of it would have been very vague childhood memories. For this new generation, it was important that they have the opportunity to rededicate themselves to God. And so, this opportunity is given by God through Joshua in the events of the time that they would have given the time of the time of the time of the year that they were concerned. So, of course, another significant element that would explain the reason for this taking place at this particular time, and a very significant reason, was what we've already mentioned, that Joshua was about to die.

and he had a pastoral concern for the people. He was conscious of how prone they were to wander, how tempted they were to go in directions that would bring no blessing or happiness to them.

[10:30] And so, as he is about to die, he gives them this opportunity. You know, I'm going, but I want you, before I go, to dedicate yourselves to God. Here is your opportunity to consider what is involved and to consciously and seriously rededicate yourselves to the service of God. And so, the covenant is performed or takes place in that context of Joshua's imminent departure.

Well, Joshua gathers the people at Shechem. We read there in verse 1 of chapter 24, then Joshua assembled all the tribes of Israel at Shechem. The location itself was a location rich with historic significance. It was at Shechem that Abraham, who had been called by God to the promised land when he arrived, it was at Shechem that he built an altar to the Lord. We read of that in Genesis chapter 12. It was also at Shechem that Jacob bought a plot of land and built an altar that he named El Elohe Israel, mighty as the God of Israel. And indeed, there are other significant events that occurred at this location. And so, very appropriately, Joshua gathers the people at Shechem that they might renew their commitment, renew their vows before God. Well, what is involved, moving to the heart of the matter? What is involved in covenant renewal? What do we find in this chapter that we could draw from and apply to ourselves? What was involved then and what is involved now in renewing our covenant, in renewing our commitment to God? I think we find in this chapter three elements, certainly three that I want us to notice this morning. First of all, and foundational in many ways, there is the grateful recognition of God's goodness in the past. The first 13 verses of the chapter really are an opportunity for Joshua to present to the people a history lesson, that they would be reminded of God's goodness in the past. This is the foundation for what will follow. So, that's the first element.

But then following that reminder of God's goodness in the past, there is a serious call to renewed commitment. We have that in verse 14, now, in the light of all that we've been reminded of, in the light of all that God has done for you, now fear the Lord and serve Him with all faithfulness.

A serious call to renewed commitment. But then thirdly, there is also a public declaration of loyalty and commitment to the Lord's service. We have that in the very famous, perhaps the most familiar words of Joshua at the end of verse 15, but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.

And the people also, in verse 16, far be it from us to forsake the Lord, to serve other gods. And then at the end of 18, we too will serve the Lord because He is our God. So, these three elements, a grateful recognition of God's goodness in the past, a serious call to renewed commitment, and a public declaration of loyalty and commitment to the Lord's service.

[14 : 06] Let's think a little bit more about that first element, a grateful recognition of God's goodness in the past. The call to renewed commitment is not a call to blind faith, but one grounded in God's historic dealings with His people. Our God is a God with a track record, and it is on the basis of His track record that we are called to commit to Him. This is not a blind leap of faith that we would trust in God. No, on the basis of who He is and what He has done, it is a reasonable thing for us to be called to commitment. And this is what the beginning of this chapter is about, Joshua reminding the people of all that God had done. In the light of all that God has done, the call to loyalty is both welcome and reasonable. And in the executive summary of God's dealings with His people in the past, what stands out is the manner in which God has been good to

Israel. There is much that is said of what God has done, but this stands out, how good God has been to His people. And I want us to notice some characteristics of God's goodness that shine through in this account. First of all, we can notice that His goodness is permanent. It's permanent.

From the moment that God called Abraham, in the language of the passage, long ago, 500 years before the events described in this chapter, from the moment that God called Abraham as the father of His people, God has been consistently and permanently good to His people.

He was good to Abraham and to Isaac and to Jacob. He was good to His people, even and especially in their Egyptian captivity. He was good to them in raising up Moses to deliver them from Egypt.

He was good to them as they wandered in the desert as a result of their own folly and unbelief. He was good to them as they were granted entry into the promised land. But what is particularly striking of this account that we've read in chapter 24 is the manner in which the Lord considers His goodness to His people long ago as goodness that was directed to the current generation who are being addressed.

[16 : 40] It's very interesting, the language that is used. The language is language where we find repeated on multiple occasions, this is what I did for you. I took you out of Egypt. I delivered you from your enemies. I called you to my service. There is this repeated language that is used. And perhaps some of those listening could have said, well, what's this got to do with me? This happened hundreds of years ago or before I was born. But what is very clear is that in God's estimation, in God's understanding of things, and that is what interests us, His goodness to His people in the past also constitutes His goodness to His people in the present, and that includes us. You see, when we read of these events that for us happened thousands of years ago, we're not to look at them and say, well, yes, that's very interesting or fascinating or intriguing. No, we are to understand that this was God being good to us because we are part of that people. Our union with God's people extends not only across borders and continents. This morning we are united to God's people all over the world who gather to worship God, and that is true. But our union with God's people extends across generations. And so, we are one with God's people who were delivered from Egypt and who entered the Promised Land. When God was good to His people there, He was good to you, He was good to me, for we are one people with God's people with Him. His goodness is permanent. We belong to a family and have been made participants of a covenant of grace that extends through history as an eloquent and powerful testimony to the permanent goodness of God. And as God has been permanently good in the past, so we can be sure He will be good in the present and into the future. So, this is one aspect of God's goodness. His goodness is permanent.

But we can also notice that His goodness is sovereign. The prelude to the ceremony itself, this historical introduction, is also striking in the manner in which God is ever the protagonist. It is God who takes the initiative. God is good to His people in a manner that is sovereign and unconstrained.

Again, we could notice the language. We don't have time to go through all the details. But the language that we can just skim through in these verses, I took your father Abraham. I gave him Isaac. I assigned the hill country of Seir. I sent Moses and Aaron. I afflicted the Egyptians. I brought you out.

I sent the hornet before you. I gave you the land. And we could go on. Time and time again, the repeated emphasis is on God's sovereign goodness. God takes the initiative. God is the one who decides to love and to deliver and to provide for His people. It's not in response to His people's goodness or the merit of His people. No, this is sovereign goodness. This is what we call grace, undeserved, unmerited love towards us. And so, the people of God in Joshua's day and today are being reminded to look back and to recognize that our God has been good to us. His goodness is permanent. His goodness is sovereign.

His goodness is saving. It's redemptive. The principal purpose of God's goodness is to save His people, to grant His people rest. He provided His people with a deliverer and saved them from slavery in Egypt.

[20 : 32] He gave them new life in a land flowing with milk and honey. And we know that deliverance from Egypt, though a real historical event, also is an event that points forward, is a shadow that looks forward to God's ultimate and most glorious act of salvation and redemption in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ, who was sent into this world to die in our place and in our stead. His goodness is saving. It's redemptive goodness. It is a goodness that has this wonderful and glorious purpose. The depth of God's goodness is most vividly portrayed in the salvation that He has brought on our behalf. Hence, how appropriate that we can gather round the Lord's table, as we will do next Sunday morning, and remember the death of Jesus in our place. And as we remember His saving goodness, so renew our commitment to Him in response to His love for us. His goodness is permanent and sovereign and permanent and sovereign and saving. And we can say also it's generous, just very fleetingly. Just noticing the language at the end of this historical prologue in verse 13, as really God brings things to the present. And He's speaking to those who had experienced the matters He's dealing with now. 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. Language that speaks of this gratuitous generosity of God, way beyond what might have been imagined or expected. Even in the details of their everyday lives, God has shown Himself and proven Himself to be astonishingly generous. He is a generous

God. His goodness, His goodness. And I say to you, Christian friend, this morning, is that not your experience that God has generously provided for you in every way in this year that has ended, and you can be sure will continue to do in this year that has begun. So this is the first aspect of this covenant renewal. It begins with a grateful recognition of God's goodness in the past, but it continues with a serious call to renewed commitment. We've noticed there in verse 14, now, now, in the light of all of this, now, fear the Lord and serve Him with all faithfulness. And this call to renewed commitment involves two fundamental elements, in addition to the grounds for loyalty already established by the historical prologue. So in addition to that, there are two fundamental elements in this call to renewed commitment. And the two elements are these, understanding and decision. There has to be, first of all, understanding. Now, what do I mean by that? Well, this understanding that is an integral element of this call to renewed commitment. This understanding, in turn, involves two elements. Firstly, the people must understand what commitment to the Lord involves. Well, what does it involve? They're grand words. They're fine words. We will serve the Lord. As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord. They sound very stirring and very wonderful, but what does that mean? The people need to know what is involved in committing themselves to God. And what does it involve? Well, then in verse 14, we read, now, fear the Lord and serve Him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods of your fathers, or throw away the gods your forefathers worshipped beyond the river and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. There are these two elements. On the one hand, the people need to throw away that which is wrong, that which is displeasing to God. They must throw away their idols. They must throw away that behavior that goes against God and is displeasing to God. This commitment involves getting rid of stuff. But as they get rid of stuff, so together with that, they must also commit themselves to serving God, to doing that which pleases Him, to being useful in His service. And the two can and must go together. These elements of commitment to God, throwing out the stuff that is displeasing to God and committing yourself to a life that is pleasing to Him. So, I wonder for us this morning, what stuff do you need to throw out of your life? What sins do you need to get rid of once and for all? What do you need to repent of at the beginning of this year? Because you see, if there is sin in your life that you're not willing to throw out, then just forget about serving the

Lord. Because you can't do it. The two things can't go together. You can't have in your life, in one little corner, that little precious sin that you hold on to, and then imagine that you can be useful in God's service, that you can be loyal to Him. No, there is stuff you need to throw out.

Throw away, throw away the gods your forefathers worshipped. What do you need to throw out? And as you throw that out, so you are able, with Joshua and the people, to serve God. So, this understanding involves an understanding of what is involved in being committed to God. But there's another element to this understanding that emerges from the passage, and that is there needs to be an understanding, an appreciation of how difficult it is to faithfully serve the Lord and the grave consequences of disloyalty. Notice in verses 19 and 20, and it's really very telling, and it gives an indication of how well Joshua knew the people. You see, before this point, the people have said very eloquently and very clearly, we will serve the Lord. Now, you might have imagined that in the light of that response, Joshua would have been a happy chappy. Well, isn't this wonderful? I'm about to die, and the people are saying, we will serve the Lord. I can die a happy man. My job is complete. But what does he do? Does he congratulate them? Does he encourage them for their willingness to serve the

Lord? Now, what does he do in verse 19? 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 sin. 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. What Joshua is doing is he's saying, think very carefully about what you are committing to.

[27 : 38] You see, it's easy at this great ceremony when everybody's gathered, very easy to say, we will serve the Lord. And he says, but think very carefully what that involves. Think about the stuff you're going to have to throw out. Are you willing to throw it out? Are you willing to get rid of that which is displeasing to God? Are you willing to live your life committed to God and His service?

Think very carefully. Don't make some superficial commitment that then you'll fail to be true to, because the consequences of that are very somber and solemn. So, this understanding that is an integral element to renewed commitment involves an understanding of what commitment to the Lord involves, and an understanding, an appreciation of how difficult it is and the consequences of disloyalty.

But I said there were two elements to this renewed commitment. Understanding, which we've also noticed, has in turn two elements. But there's also, of course, the element of decision. A call must, of course, be followed by a decision. If there is a call to commitment, those who are so called must respond. The people must choose. When God calls us to choose, as He does this morning, as He did then, there can be no neutrality. It isn't an option to say, well, I'm not going to decide, because that's a decision. You can't say, well, you know, others may decide, but I'm just an observer here. I don't particularly have any intention of deciding one way or another. That's not an option. You see, you will decide one way or another. Either you will decide to serve the Lord, or you won't. And even if you don't say anything, you're making a decision. You are taking a choice. There is no neutrality in the matter of loyalty to God. Either we are loyal to Him, or we are disloyal to Him. It's one or the other. It really is that black and white. Are you for Christ, or are you against Him? Will you follow Jesus, or will you do your own thing? As you look back on the year that has passed, were you loyal to the Lord? Did you follow Jesus? Did you serve Him, or did you do your own thing? You see, if you're just going to carry on from the year that has passed into the year that has begun, that also is a decision. It's a decision to postpone once again, to delay once again your commitment and your service of God. So, this covenant renewal that we read of in this chapter, yes, it involves a grateful recognition of God's goodness in the past, but then it is followed, and necessarily so, by this serious call to renewed commitment, which of course in turn is followed by a public declaration of loyalty and commitment to the

Lord's service that we have in verse 15 and following. We have, of course, that commitment on the part of Joshua himself, and also on the part of the people. We'll limit ourselves to Joshua, really just for reasons of time. And notice three aspects of Joshua's commitment that merit comment.

First thing that I would say about Joshua's commitment, especially in these very stirring and memorable and familiar words, but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord. One thing we can say about it, the first thing I want to say about it, is that it's unequivocal. It's unequivocal.

[31 : 12] But as for me, Joshua is conscious that others may well take a different decision, but his decision will not be influenced by what others think or what others do. He doesn't want to follow the crowd or test the waters or see where the wind is blowing. He doesn't want to work out if it's in his interests or not to follow the Lord. He doesn't want to do some analysis, well, is this a good idea or a bad idea?

No, he unequivocally determines, this is what I will do. If others follow, good and well. If they don't, well, that's their choice. Not that he's uninterested in what others will do, far from it, but he won't be influenced by what others would do. Now, as it happens on this occasion, the people did.

It would seem, with a measure of sincerity, echo Joshua's commitment. But whether they did or whether they didn't is not material to Joshua. As for me, you do as you decide, he says. But as for me, this is what I'm going to do, it is unequivocal. It is also, and of course, this is very much evident in what we said already, it is personal. As for me, it's true that Joshua was the leader of the people. It's true that, in a sense, he represented the nation. And yet, in this matter of loyalty to the Lord, a personal commitment is required. And this is what is forthcoming from Joshua. As for me, this is what I'm going to do. And so, the application is so obvious.

What about you? What about you? What will you do? Never mind what the person sitting next to you will do. Never mind even what your wife will do, or your children will do, or your friends will do. Now, it's not that you're uninterested, but at this point, I say, what about you? What will you do? Will you serve the Lord? Your parents serve the Lord? Well, praise God for that. But what about you? What about you? As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord. Will you make that personal commitment at the beginning of this year? But of course, it's not only personal. And that brings us to the third aspect that I want us to notice, and with this we close. Joshua's commitment is representative also.

As for me and my household. Joshua has a responsibility not only for himself. He has a responsibility as a father and as head of his household on behalf of others, a spiritual responsibility on behalf of others.

[33 : 50] It's not that the others have no responsibility, but Joshua has a responsibility as father and head of his household. He has the duty and indeed the authority to declare not only his own personal loyalty, but that of his household to the Lord. And in this, there is a particular challenge to Christian fathers.

And we make no apology for focusing on Christian fathers, because in God's economy, in the manner in which God has ordered the affairs of his people, he places a particular responsibility on Christian fathers, husbands and fathers. You have a particular responsibility, spiritual responsibility, on behalf of your family. Will you fulfill that responsibility? You see, we are plagued in the church, and it has ever been so with anemic fathers. And we thank God for spiritual mothers, but where are the committed spiritual fathers who lead in their homes? This is a great need that we have. And I speak to myself as I speak to others who must respond to others who must respond to this, who occupy that place. We'll be thinking a little bit more about this this evening as we see what sadly went wrong following this very wonderful commitment that was given by Joshua. Not that things went wrong with Joshua, but with the people as subsequent to this ceremony as the years passed. But that for this evening. Well, there we have it, as we do draw everything that we said to a close this morning. Three essential elements to biblical renewal and rededication. A grateful recognition of God's goodness in the past, a serious call to renewed commitment and commitment and commitment to the Lord's service. Well, what about you? Do you gratefully recognize all that God has done for you in His gracious dealings with God's people in history? Do you recognize His goodness to you personally in the year that has passed? Do you stand in grateful awe at His permanent, sovereign, and generous goodness? And if you do, how then will you respond to this call to renewal, to rededication, to a reaffirmation of your loyalty to God? What then will you choose to do?

Choose for yourself this day whom you will serve. Let us pray.