

Unit I: From Nomadic Tribes to Settled People

Do Not Conform to the World

DEVOTIONAL READING: Jeremiah 31:27-34

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Joshua 23-24

PRINT PASSAGE: Joshua 24:18-27

Key Verse

And put away the gods which your fathers served on the other side of the flood, and in Egypt; and serve ye the LORD. (Joshua 24:14b, KJV)

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Throw away the gods your ancestors worshiped beyond the Euphrates River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. (Joshua 24:14b, NIV)

Lesson Aims

As a result of experiencing this lesson, you should be able to do the following:

- Make worship a priority in their lives.
- Identify the idols that distract them from God.
- Strive not to be diverted from faithful living.

*Key Terms

Chosen (verse 22)—Hebrew: *báchar* (baw-khar'): selected; elected; appointed; decided for. This word is a volitional commitment indicating a deliberate act of allegiance. The people of Israel were witnesses in their choosing to follow the Lord only.

Covenant (verse 25)—Hebrew: *berít* (bereeth'): a treaty, alliance, pledge; a binding agreement; a binding relational commitment, often sealed with obligations, signs, witnesses, and sometimes sacrifice. In Scripture, it describes God's formal relationship with His people, marked by loyalty, faithfulness, and divine initiative. One was made between the people of Israel and Joshua, stating that they would serve the Lord over the gods of the land.

Jealous (verse 19)—Hebrew: *qannôw'* (kan-no'): zealous; passionately protective. God's jealousy underscores His covenant claim on Israel and His intolerance of idolatry.

Statute(s) (verse 25)—Hebrew: *chôq* (khole): prescribed ordinance(s); prescribed task(s); "decrees" (NIV). Statutes were a part of the covenantal framework that Israel must obey.

Witness (verse 27)—Hebrew: *'édâh* (aydaw'): testimony; the Hebrew word carries the sense of public, accountable testimony. A witness is not passive, stands to verify, affirm, or testify to the truth of an agreement, event, or obligation. Joshua told the people that they served as witnesses to choosing to serve the Lord instead of household gods.

*(Word Study Supplement—Refer to page 2)



Overview

The brain has an extraordinary capacity to hold memory. Scientists report that humans can store 1 petabyte (or one million gigabytes) worth of memory or as much as the entire internet. Astounding as that statistic is, the struggle to remember birthdays, anniversaries, and what we had for breakfast this morning still remains. But long-memory is a process. It takes 5-20 repetitions for information to stick in our brains. Our short-term memories become long-term memories by going through our hippocampus before being stored in our prefrontal cortex during a process of consolidation. Over days, months, and years, our brains reorganize where to store information. This gives us the ability to recall things easily and automatically. Joshua wasn't a brain scientist, but he knew the importance of recalling the events that shaped the lives of the Israelite people and God's central place in their story. He pleaded with the Israelites to have long-term memory. In his final days, he insisted God's chosen people remember God's faithfulness to them from their days in the wilderness and for generations to come.

Life Happens

Tina works in a fast-paced tech startup where hustle is a badge of honor and image is everything. Over lunch, her coworkers brag about writing off personal vacations as “business trips” to dodge taxes. One colleague smirked, “If you're not working the system, you're leaving money on the table.” Tina laughed politely, but something inside her twists.

That weekend, she went to a friend's birthday party. Vape pens circle the room like party favors. “It's legal now, no big deal,” someone shrugged. Tina felt the pressure to join in, not wanting to seem uptight or old-fashioned. Later, everyone crowded together for Instagram photos, striking glamorous, borderline provocative poses. They said, “It's just for the likes,” they say, adjusting angles and swiping through filters.

The next day, while shopping, Tina noticed the trend toward skimpy, attention-grabbing outfits. A friend nudged her and said, “If you want to stand out, you've got to show some skin.” Tina paused. Was she being too rigid or is this what “normal” looks like now?

At church that evening, Tina shared her week with the young adult group. To her surprise, several nodded knowingly. They've felt the same pressures: cheating on taxes because “everyone does it,” posting curated im-

ages to look successful, joining in on casual substance use just to avoid being the odd one out. Together they wrestled with the same question Tina has been carrying: How do you live in the world without becoming shaped by it? And where, exactly, is the line between staying culturally relevant and quietly compromising who you are?

Questions

1. When everyone around you normalizes sketchy practices, how do you respond without feeling isolated?
2. What's the difference between adapting to culture and conforming to it? Where do you personally draw the line?
3. How can we support each other in resisting subtle compromises that seem harmless but erode character over time?
4. How can Christians resist conforming without coming across as judgmental or self-righteous?

COMMENTARY ON THE BIBLICAL TEXT

A People Who Chose to Serve (*Joshua 24:18-22*)

KJV

18 And the LORD drave 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.

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.

NIV

18 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.”

19 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.

20 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.”

21 But the people said to Joshua, “No! We will serve the LORD.”

22 Then Joshua said, “You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen to serve the LORD.”

The scene at Shechem stands as a defining moment in the book of Joshua. The entire nation has gathered, and Joshua, now old and near the end of his life, is giving his final address. He has walked them through their history—how God called Abraham out of Mesopotamia, delivered Israel from Egypt, brought them through the wilderness, and handed them a land they did not build. Then he puts a choice in front of them: choose this day whom you will serve.

The people respond with conviction. They declare that they will serve the Lord because He is the one who brought them out of Egypt and performed great signs before their eyes. Their answer sounds resolute. But Joshua pushes back. He tells them plainly, “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.” His words are not meant to discourage them. They are meant to strip away any casual commitment.

The people insist again: “No! We will serve the Lord.” So Joshua makes them witnesses against themselves. “You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen to serve the Lord,” he says. And they reply, “Yes, we are witnesses.” Joshua is not accepting a warm sentiment. He is locking them into a binding agreement with consequences attached. In a culture that treats commitment as optional, this exchange makes clear that following God has always required more than good intentions.

 **What Do You Think?** How would you define the character of a jealous God? Are there people in your life who can hold you accountable to the faith commitments you make? Who are your witnesses?

Throw Away the Foreign Gods (*Joshua 24:23-25*)

KJV

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.

25 So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and set them a statute and an ordinance in Shechem.

NIV

23 “Now then,” said Joshua, “throw away the foreign gods that are among you and yield your hearts to the LORD, the God of Israel.”

24 And the people said to Joshua, “We will serve the LORD our God and obey him.”

25 On that day Joshua made a covenant for the people, and there at Shechem he reaffirmed for them decrees and laws.

After the people declare their commitment, Joshua does something unexpected. He tells them to throw away the foreign gods that are among them and yield their hearts to the Lord. The fact that he says this after they have just pledged their loyalty means there were still idols in the camp. The people were standing at a covenant ceremony, swearing allegiance to the God of Israel, while carrying objects of worship that belonged to other gods. Joshua knew that words without action meant nothing.

The people respond one more time: “We will serve the Lord our God and obey him.” On that day, Joshua made a covenant for the people at Shechem and reaffirmed for them decrees and laws. Shechem carried deep significance in Israel’s memory. It was the place where God first promised the land to Abraham in Genesis 12:6-7. Jacob buried the foreign gods of his household there in Genesis 35:4. The location was no accident. He drew a line between Israel’s past promises and their present commitment.

The call to put away foreign gods is not limited to carved images on a shelf. For the original audience, Baal, Ashtoreth, and the local Canaanite deities represented real temptations—gods that promised fertility, prosperity, and control over outcomes. For modern readers, the idols may look different, but the pattern is the same. Anything that competes with God for the deepest allegiance of a person’s heart fits the description Joshua had in mind.

 **What Do You Think?** What strategies do you use to keep the idols in your life from turning your focus away from God? How have they worked? What strategies need improvement?

A Stone That Remembers (*Joshua 24:26-27*)

KJV

26 And Joshua wrote these words in the book of the law of God, and took a great stone, and set it up there under an oak, that was by the sanctuary of the LORD.

27 And Joshua said unto all the people, Behold, this stone shall be a witness unto us; for it hath heard all the words of the LORD which he spake unto us: it shall be therefore a witness unto you, lest ye deny your God.

NIV

26 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.

27 “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.”

Joshua recorded everything in the Book of the Law of God. Then he took a large stone and set it up under the oak near the holy place of the Lord. He told 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.” The image is arresting. A stone cannot hear. A stone cannot speak. But Joshua gave it a role in the story anyway—a silent, immovable reminder of what the people had promised.

This is the second time in the book that Joshua sets up a memorial stone. The first was at Gilgal after the Jordan crossing, built so that future generations would ask what the stones meant and hear the story of God’s faithfulness. This stone at Shechem serves a different purpose. It is not there to celebrate what God did. It is there to hold the people accountable.

Joshua understood something about human nature that the rest of the book of Judges would painfully confirm: people forget. They forget their promises and they forget what God has done. The stone at Shechem was his way of saying, this moment happened, and you cannot undo it. This passage cuts two ways—it warns, and it steadies. The God who heard the promise is the same God who holds people to it—not to punish, but because faithfulness is the only road that actually leads somewhere.

 **What Do You Think?** What are the “foreign gods” in your life that compete for your attention and loyalty? What would it look like to put them away and yield your heart fully to God?

Your Life

Being in community with other believers takes humility and vulnerability. Take inventory of your faith community. Who are the people who listen, encourage, and pour into you? What role do you play in maintaining the spiritual health of your village?

Your World!

So often we only make acquaintances and connections with people who are in the places we frequent, same worship services or are on our heavily curated social media timelines. Consider how your church is makes connections with those who share more differences than similarities to your congregation.

Closing Prayer

Dear God, help us to make the radical choice to follow Your ways rather than the ways of the world. Guide us to take Your invitation to worship You alone every day, to glorify Your name, to faithfully serve You and Your people. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.

Home Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY, October 5	“Christ Died for All”	(Romans 5:1-10)
TUESDAY, October 6	“Grace Abounds Despite Our Sin”	(Romans 5:11-21)
WEDNESDAY, October 7	“Worship God in the Chosen Sanctuary”	(Deuteronomy 12:1-14)
THURSDAY, October 8	“Reject Unworthy Forms of Worship”	(Deuteronomy 12:20-32)
FRIDAY, October 9	“Reject Earthly Desires”	(Colossians 3:1-11)
SATURDAY, October 10	“Clothe Yourself with Godliness”	(Colossians 3:12-17)
SUNDAY, October 11	“God Is Faithful Anyway”	(Judges 2:1-15)