

# JOSHUA—WEEK 16

## KEEPING THE FAITH



F. Michael Slay

*A DEEP Study*

**The Fellowship of Ailbe**

*Joshua, Week 16 — Keeping the Faith*  
*The Cover Picture is by Jean Fouquet (1420–1477)*  
*On display in Paris at the Bibliotheque nationale de France.*

Joshua's final charge to the people focuses on keeping the faith. By challenging their claims to faith, he cons them into making some pretty strong pledges. That will keep them faithful.

But this will ultimately only last one generation.

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1 Joshua 24:14–15

*“Now therefore, fear the LORD, serve Him in sincerity and in truth, and put away the gods which your fathers served on the other side of the River and in Egypt. Serve the LORD! And if it seems evil to you to serve the LORD, choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.”*

Note: *“the other side of the River,”* doesn’t refer to the Jordan River. The River (capitalized) is the great river—the Euphrates. Abraham’s father, Terah, dwelt on the other (northeast) side and served other gods (idols), as noted in Joshua 24:2.

But what’s up with Joshua’s use of the word *“evil”* here? What could he possibly mean by, *“And if it seems evil to you to serve the LORD”*? How could that seem evil?

It’s a Hebrew idiom. The Hebrew word is ra (רָע), and the root word does mean evil. But ra can be translated as bad, disagreeable, distress, misery, injury or calamity. The NIV translates it as, *“undesirable,”* but that’s too much of a paraphrase. Ra is stronger than that; it’s dreadfully undesirable.

Joshua uses this term deliberately. He’s poking his audience—making the choice stark. It’s a dreadfully serious choice. They can’t take it lightly.

And Joshua pokes them a second time. Not only is the choice serious, it’s unavoidable. They must choose between the LORD and some other god.

Whether they admit it or not, everyone serves a god.

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Joshua’s point isn’t just for that time. It’s what Jesus was getting at when He said, *“No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.”* — Matthew 6:24 (ESV)

People who don’t serve God may not be serving money, but they’re serving something—approval, pleasure, power, etc. And even if they fulfill their dreams, they find no release from their slavery.

Our fallen human nature turns legitimate goals and aspirations into gods that enslave us. The classic example of that is on display in the Hilton Head area where I live—retirement-disappointment.

A great mentor once told me, *“It takes three years to get sick of golf.”* This doesn’t apply to serious golfers who’ve been playing all their lives, but people who thought they’d find fulfillment in retirement leisure activities are frequently profoundly disappointed. They serve a god who does not deliver.

Many retirees turn to the truth and discover a life full of meaning in service to God, often through charity.

Their long and winding road to the promised land looks a lot like Israel’s.

2 Joshua 24:16–18

*So the people answered and said: “Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods; for the LORD our God is He who brought us and our fathers up out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage, who did those great signs in our sight, and preserved us in all the way that we went and among all the people through whom we passed. And the LORD drove out from before us all the people, including the Amorites who dwelt in the land. We also will serve the LORD, for He is our God.”*

They’re missing the point. Joshua wasn’t just talking about everyone within earshot; he was talking about all Israel, including future generations.

The people saying, “*Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods,*” are only speaking for themselves (and, as we’ll see, they’re not all that impressive anyway). Joshua’s message is for everyone and for all time.

The people standing before Joshua witnessed the miracle of crossing the Jordan River on dry land. They saw the walls of Jericho come a tumblin’ down. Their faith has a foundation that isn’t easily shaken.

Others, especially future generations, will have an easier time disbelieving.

And disbelieving will be their bent.

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We have a similar problem; Christ’s resurrection was a hundred generations ago. We didn’t see it and we don’t know anyone who did. It’s easier to disbelieve.

Christians need to take this as a challenge. Uncertain faith is not okay. Christians who are unsure of the facts of Christianity should make a point of investigating the claims and nailing this all down.

*Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.* — Hebrews 11:1

The old NIV translated this as, “*Faith is being sure ...*” I like the feeling this conveys, but that is translating a noun as a verb. Still, the point holds. Uncertain faith is no faith at all.

We should study (and churches should teach) the evidence for the resurrection. That includes studying crucifixion, how it kills, and why the Romans used it. Part of knowing that He rose is knowing that He was dead. The other part of knowing He rose is studying what the eyewitnesses said. That includes studying the reliability of scripture.

This can take a lot of effort, and may be less fun than other studies, but neglect this part of Christian education and you’ll get believers whose commitment to the lordship of Christ won’t pass a stress test.

Lastly, we must counter the lie that Christianity is opposed to science. Here’s a must see video on that.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OMBQwGzn\\_TE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OMBQwGzn_TE)

Scientists are starting to admit that atheism has fatal scientific flaws.

3 Joshua 24:19–24

*But Joshua said to the people, “You cannot serve the LORD, for He is a holy God. He is a jealous God; He will not forgive your transgressions nor your sins. If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, then He will turn and do you harm and consume you, after He has done you good.”*

*And the people said to Joshua, “No, but we will serve the LORD!”*

*So Joshua said to the people, “You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen the LORD for yourselves, to serve Him.”*

*And they said, “We are witnesses!”*

*“Now therefore,” he said, “put away the foreign gods which are among you, and incline your heart to the LORD God of Israel.”*

*And the people said to Joshua, “The LORD our God we will serve, and His voice we will obey!”*

This passage starts with Joshua rejecting their offer! He asked them to choose who they will serve. They say The LORD! So Joshua says, “Nope; you can’t do that.” Really? What’s going on here?

Joshua is jockeying them into position. He’s want them to amp up their commitment.

So they shout, “No, but we will serve the LORD!” Joshua says, “You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen the LORD for yourselves, to serve Him.” And they say, “We are witnesses!”

Bingo. They’ve pledged full commitment and Joshua can call them on it. OK, but time out. They had *foreign gods* that they needed to *put away*? The leaders of the nation? No way!

Way. The leaders of Israel, the ones we said in yesterday’s lesson have the strongest faith, still have the kind of foreign gods that can be put away. That means physical idols—statues that can be trashed. Yikes.

Joshua has “conned” them into making a stronger commitment to following the LORD than what was in their hearts. When challenged, they said “all the right things” so that they’d look righteous.

In other words, Joshua’s con job worked because the leaders’ pride got in the way of their unbelief.

That’s one for the ages.

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This is a clinic on how to nudge people upward. Joshua’s public challenge—“*You cannot serve the LORD, for He is a holy God.*”—may be too blunt for church, but something like that should work. After folks respond to the set up with a commitment they don’t really mean, then call their bluff.

“Let’s see how many folks show up for a work day this Saturday.” “You can measure the faith of a congregation by the number of people who show up for the prayer meetings.”

Challenges like that can get people to start living their faith.

4 Joshua 24:25–28

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

*Then 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 oak that was by the sanctuary of the LORD. And Joshua said to all the people, “Behold, this stone shall be a witness to us, for it has heard all the words of the LORD which He spoke to us. It shall therefore be a witness to you, lest you deny your God.” So Joshua let the people depart, each to his own inheritance.*

Having gotten the audience to commit to following the LORD exclusively (including putting away their foreign gods), Joshua quickly cements the deal before they have a chance to back out. As is their style, he sets up a monument of stone to symbolize the agreement.

But this time he also writes it down. In the long run, that will be the more lasting record.

Even before Gutenberg, copies were made of important written documents. They couldn’t make hundreds, like you can with a printing press, but copies were made. This took a lot of effort, but that’s what made the writings permanent. It even redefined the meaning of permanent.

The reason stones were used for monuments is that they don’t decay. It would be silly to make a monument of wood. Wood rots, and the point is to make it last forever.

But with the Torah, and now this book, a new kind of permanence was invented.

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We owe an incalculable debt to the people who copied scripture. Many of them devoted their lives to this endeavor, and yet made only a single copy or two of select portions. The effort involved was staggering and for what? No one gave them any reward or even credit. All we have is the copies, which are unsigned.

This is a curious example of what it means to be a saint. It may be that most of the great saints are people we never heard of—people who didn’t want to be heard of. They did something they knew was important and left it at that.

Our society is too oriented towards popularity and high profiles. God often calls people in quiet ways. How is He calling you?

Do not shrink from low profile tasks. Do not expect, or want, praise. The purpose of work for the kingdom is the result, not whether anyone in this world notices.

The institution of the office of deacon is based on this concept. Serving tables and taking care of widows was not the stuff of glory in the first century. Yet the apostles chose the most spiritually mature men they knew for this job and created the second highest office in the church for them.

We need to get back to priorities like that.

5 Joshua 24:29–33

*Now it came to pass after these things that Joshua the son of Nun, the servant of the LORD, died, being one hundred and ten years old. And they buried him within the border of his inheritance at Timnath Serah, which is in the mountains of Ephraim, on the north side of Mount Gaash.*

*Israel served the LORD all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua, who had known all the works of the LORD which He had done for Israel.*

*The bones of Joseph, which the children of Israel had brought up out of Egypt, they buried at Shechem, in the plot of ground which Jacob had bought from the sons of Hamor the father of Shechem for one hundred pieces of silver, and which had become an inheritance of the children of Joseph.*

*And Eleazar the son of Aaron died. They buried him in a hill belonging to Phinehas his son, which was given to him in the mountains of Ephraim.*

This passage concludes the book with some beautiful notes. Joshua is called the servant of the LORD (ev-  
ed Yahweh, *עֲבָד יְהוָה*) for the first time. This gives him a status similar to Moses.

The bones of Joseph are buried at Shechem, in keeping with a promise made centuries earlier. Eleazar's burial is also noted in keeping with his service. But ...

The second paragraph is foreboding.

*Israel served the LORD all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua, who had known all the works of the LORD which He had done for Israel.*

This sounds nice; they kept the faith for the rest of this generation, but that's all it says.

What about the next generation?

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The next generation drops the ball.

The book of Judges continues the narrative, but rewinds a bit. When it gets to the paragraph that records the death of Joshua, we see the news he dreaded. The faith starts to fade as soon as it gets a chance.

*So the people served the LORD all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua, who had seen all the great works of the LORD which He had done for Israel. ... When all that generation had been gathered to their fathers, another generation arose after them who did not know the LORD nor the work which He had done for Israel. — Judges 2:7, 10 (ESV)*

Joshua's fears were realized. The monuments and books didn't prevent it.

And so, the cycle of faith continues. Most folks only believe when unbelief is impossible.

As soon as the first-hand eyewitness memory of what God did fades, the faith that it spawned fades too.

*Questions for reflection or discussion*

1. What are all your gods?
2. What do you think of the video?
3. When has someone successfully nudged you to grow in Christ?
4. What quiet things has God called you to?
5. What can we do to transfer our faith to future generations?

*Items for prayer:*