

Throw Away the Gods (Joshua 24:14-28)
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Today, we tend to think of worldly success as gaining something, like wealth, position, or fame. Even in spiritual things we talk about gaining more quiet time or accomplishing our Bible reading goals. But in Luke 9:23-24 Jesus tells us that success is about how much we lose for Jesus, not how much we gain. Success is losing everything that stands in the way of following God. For Israel, this meant throwing away their false gods. Today's passage comes after the conquest of the Promised Land. Joshua called the people to Shechem to encourage them to be faithful to God. He gave them the choice whether to serve God. Fresh out of victory, the Israelites fervently pledged to serve God. This is similar to the response many of us have when we go to retreats and are on fire for God. But instead of encouraging the Israelites, Joshua says they can't be faithful and their rebelliousness would lead to their doom. And he was right. Within a generation, Israel followed after other gods and entered cycles of rebellion, judgment, and repentance.

How could Israel be so foolish? How could they abandon God when they saw the miracles He performed when He delivered them from Egypt to the Promised Land? But their problem with idolatry is also our problem. John Ortberg said that idols haven't gone away, they are just sneakier. We got rid of idols of wood and stone but idols still exist in the form of our careers, reputation, wealth, and even relationships. Idols are anything we go to instead of God for a sense of identity, purpose, blessing, success, joy, and satisfaction. What thing, if lost, would rob your life of worth? That is your idol. We seek them out because they are immediate and tangible, not like our invisible, transcendent, unconfined, uncontrollable God. Idols promise self-reliance and control over our lives. People serve idols to gain control over what they normally couldn't control. Israel served Baal to control the rain. We serve money to control our future, and pursue power to control others.

But idols don't deliver on their promise. Instead they make us prideful, which is the ultimate sin. They deceive us into thinking we have control. This is even more dangerous when we think we can serve God like we serve idols, and compel Him to bless us. Here the true idol is ourselves; we serve God to serve ourselves. Once again this is pride, which makes us enemies of

God, as it did with Satan. Joshua 24:19-20 uses the language of hostility. God is jealous when we worship idols. He isn't jealous of powerless idols. Rather He is jealous of us. It's the feeling when someone takes credit for your work. Everything we have comes from God, yet we take credit for it and rely on ourselves rather than God to provide.

The second thing idols do is make us bitter and angry when they are taken from us. It makes us unforgiving. Third, they make us joyless. Idols never satisfy, but they demand constantly. How many have sacrificed their families and relationship with God at the altar of their careers? Finally, idols make us dead. They are a trap that leads to destruction.

So how do we deal with these idols? Shechem, the location of the gathering, is where God made a promise to bless Abram in Genesis 12. The Canaanites believed deities spoke through sacred trees, so God appeared in something that was familiar to Abram in order to provide guidance. So this tree for Israel was a symbol of divine teaching and guidance. Also at Shechem Joshua set up a stone as a reminder of Israel's promise to serve God. But it also served as a witness against them when they were unfaithful. It reminded them of their weakness and failure. Just like the Law, written on stone, condemned Israel, so too this stone cursed Israel because of their sin.

So where's the hope in this? For us we look to another tree and another stone. The tree is the cross of Jesus (Galatians 3:13-14), who not only gives us teaching and guidance but has the power to save, enabling us to discard our idols. All we are like sheep, who go astray even when a shepherd is right in front of us. We have to be carried by the Shepherd, not just led. The stone is Christ, our Cornerstone (1 Peter 2:4-6). Through Him we realize we are weak and need a savior, and we realize idols aren't enough to save us. But to get rid of our obsession with idols we must adopt an obsession with Jesus. Jesus says that if we lose our life, we gain it. His life replaces ours, and it's far better. Jesus isn't asking us to do anything He hadn't already done. He went from heaven to earth, to be executed as a criminal. But God raised Him up to the highest place (Philippians 2:6-11). And if we are united with Jesus, we too will be raised with Him and inherit His kingdom.