

Homiletics Analysis: Joshua 24

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Joshua 24 is the covenant renewal and farewell address that closes the book of Joshua and, in a real sense, closes the entire era of the conquest and settlement. The chapter divides into four movements. First, Joshua assembles all Israel at Shechem before God and delivers a sweeping recital of God's saving acts from Abraham through the conquest (vv. 1–13) — a compressed redemptive-historical survey structured as the LORD's own first-person speech. Second, Joshua issues a direct summons: choose this day whom you will serve, and puts his own household's answer on the table without waiting for theirs (vv. 14–15). Third, the people respond with covenant commitment — twice — and twice Joshua presses back, warning them that they are not capable of keeping what they have just promised, that the LORD is holy and jealous and will not forgive covenant treachery (vv. 16–24). Fourth, the covenant is formally ratified at Shechem, a stone set up as witness, and the chapter closes with three burials: Joshua himself, the bones of Joseph (finally home after four centuries), and Eleazar the priest (vv. 25–33). The structure is not incidental — it mirrors Sinai covenant form (historical prologue, stipulations, witnesses, ratification) and places this moment in direct continuity with the founding covenant.

This Text — Intent

God is confronting Israel — and every generation of His people after them — with the inescapable demand of covenant exclusivity. The LORD has spoken and acted; now His people must answer. The intent is not primarily to inform (they know what God has done) but to press a decision to its sharpest possible point and to expose the gap between confident self-declaration (“we will serve the LORD”) and the actual holiness required by the God they claim to serve. Joshua's counter-pressure — “you are not able to serve the LORD” — is not rhetorical provocation; it is pastoral realism meant to drive the people past self-reliance into sober, God-dependent covenant commitment. The passage aims to produce not enthusiasm but gravity: a reckoning with who this God is, what He demands, and what is at stake when His people take His name on their lips.

Subject Sentence: The covenant-keeping LORD demands exclusive allegiance from His people — choose now.

Primary Claim: God is pressing His people past comfortable religious affirmation to a clear-eyed, costly reckoning with what it actually means to serve the holy and jealous

LORD who has redeemed them — and He will not let them coast on inherited identity or momentary enthusiasm.

Interpretive Evaluation

The Nature of Joshua's Challenge ("You Are Not Able to Serve the LORD")

The most significant and most commonly misread verses in this chapter are Joshua's counter-challenge in verses 19–20: "You are not able to serve the LORD, for He is a holy God. He is a jealous God; He will not forgive your transgression or your sins." Many evangelical expositors soften this by treating it as rhetorical provocation — a device to make the people more serious about their commitment. That reading is partially correct but insufficient. Joshua is not playing a rhetorical game. He is stating a theological reality: the people's natural capacity, left to themselves, is inadequate to the covenant's demands. The history of Judges, which immediately follows and vindicates Joshua's warning, confirms that this was not merely a motivational technique. The Reformed reading, grounded in total depravity and the inadequacy of human covenant-keeping apart from grace, takes Joshua at his word: the people genuinely cannot serve this God on their own terms. This is not pessimism — it is the setup for the only solution that will eventually work, the new covenant in which God writes His law on the heart (Jeremiah 31) and gives His Spirit to enable obedience (Ezekiel 36). Joshua 24 does not resolve the problem it raises; it names it honestly and calls the people to sober commitment despite it.

The Wesleyan/Arminian tradition tends to read Joshua's challenge as primarily a test of genuine resolve — emphasizing human freedom and the real possibility of sustained obedience through cooperative grace. This reading rightly stresses the seriousness of the people's choice and the genuine responsibility they bear, and it should not be dismissed. But it tends to underread the weight of the word "not able" (*lo' tûkelûn*) — a strong statement of incapacity, not merely a warning about difficulty. The Reformed reading acknowledges genuine human responsibility while insisting that the capacity to fulfill it is itself a gift of grace.

"He Will Not Forgive"

Verse 20's statement that the LORD "will not forgive your transgression or your sins" creates an apparent tension with the broader biblical testimony of divine forgiveness and mercy. Some expositors resolve this by making it purely conditional: "if you forsake Him, He will not forgive." That conditionality is present, but the harder edge of the statement deserves to be felt. Joshua is speaking of covenant treachery — not ordinary failing but decisive apostasy, the abandonment of the LORD for other gods. The Hebrew context (*'abar b'rit*) refers to treaty violation. The statement is not a denial of divine mercy in general but a warning that covenant-breaking with eyes open is a categorically serious offense that will draw covenant sanctions. This anticipates the curses of Deuteronomy 28 and the eventual exile. The Reformed reading holds both truths: God is abundant in mercy

to the repentant, and God is fiercely just in executing covenant judgment on those who despise His name. These are not in tension — they are both true of the same holy, jealous God.

Shechem as the Location

The choice of Shechem is not incidental, and a purely narrative reading misses its canonical weight. Shechem is where Abram first received the land promise (Genesis 12:6–7), where Jacob returned and buried foreign gods (Genesis 35:2–4), and where the covenant renewal ceremony of Deuteronomy 27 was commanded. The location carries the weight of the entire covenant history. Dispensational readings that treat this as simply the end of the conquest era without this canonical resonance miss the deliberate theological staging. The text means for the reader to feel the full arc: from Abraham’s first altar to Joshua’s final covenant — the same land, the same God, the same demands.

The Reformed Verdict

The Reformed reading of Joshua 24 holds three things together that other traditions often separate: (1) the absolute sovereignty of God as the One who acted first and whose prior grace grounds every subsequent demand; (2) the genuine responsibility of the people to choose and to commit, without evacuating human agency; and (3) the theological honesty about human incapacity that points forward to the new covenant as the only durable solution. This reading does the most justice to the full texture of the chapter — the historical recital, the summons, the counter-pressure, and the solemn ratification — without flattening any of its tensions.

Key Canonical Support

- **Deuteronomy 6:4–15** — The Shema and its surrounding commands establish the theological ground of Joshua’s call: exclusive covenant love for the LORD who redeemed Israel from Egypt; jealousy is named there too, making Joshua 24 an applied fulfillment of Deuteronomy’s core demand.
- **Jeremiah 31:31–34** — The new covenant promise directly answers the problem Joshua names: the people cannot keep covenant on their own, so God promises to write His law on their hearts and give them the capacity they lack — the divine resolution to Joshua 24’s unresolved tension.
- **Ezekiel 36:26–27** — God promises to give His people a new heart and His own Spirit to cause them to walk in His statutes — the positive counterpart to Joshua’s “you are not able”; the incapacity is real, and God’s answer is regeneration, not improvement.
- **1 Kings 18:21** — Elijah’s challenge on Carmel (“How long will you go limping between two opinions?”) is a direct echo of Joshua’s “choose this day” — the same

confrontation with half-hearted, divided allegiance recurring in the next great crisis of covenant loyalty.

- **Matthew 6:24** — Jesus’s “no one can serve two masters” restates Joshua’s binary with definitive christological authority: the choice between the LORD and other gods is not moderated in the new covenant but sharpened, resolved only in the One who alone keeps covenant perfectly and enables His people to follow.

Aim: To press the reader past inherited religious identity and emotional enthusiasm to a clear-eyed reckoning with the exclusive, holy, demanding God of the covenant — and to ground that reckoning in the grace that makes genuine service possible.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1	Joshua assembles all Israel at Shechem; leaders, judges, and officers present themselves before God	Shechem: loaded canonical location — Abraham’s altar (Gen 12), Jacob’s purification (Gen 35), covenant ceremony commanded (Deut 27)
2–4	Historical recital begins — the LORD speaks in first person: Terah and Abraham beyond the Euphrates, called and led; Isaac and Jacob; Esau given Seir	The LORD is the subject and actor throughout; Israel is the object of His initiatives, not the initiator
5–7	Moses and Aaron sent; plagues on Egypt; exodus; the sea; pursuit and drowning of Egypt; wilderness years	Emphasizes what “your eyes saw” — the recital is not abstract history but experienced grace
8–10	Amorites defeated east of Jordan; Balak and Balaam — Balaam could not curse what God had blessed	Balaam episode highlights that the LORD’s protection was invisible to Israel — they had more grace than they knew
11–13	Jericho and the kings of Canaan; hornet sent before them; they did not earn the	Verse 13 is the hinge of the recital: the whole history amounts to unearned gift —

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	land — cities, vineyards, olive groves given that they did not plant	grace all the way down
14–15	Joshua issues the summons: fear the LORD, serve Him in sincerity and faithfulness; put away other gods; choose this day; my house will serve the LORD	The summons is grounded in the recital — because of what God has done, now choose; Joshua’s own answer is not contingent on the assembly’s response
16–18	The people respond: far be it from us to forsake the LORD; they rehearse what God has done; they declare allegiance	The people’s answer mirrors the recital — they have understood the argument; the question is whether understanding alone sustains commitment
19–20	Joshua counter-challenges: you are not able to serve the LORD; He is holy and jealous; He will not forgive covenant treachery	The most theologically dense moment in the chapter; Joshua is not satisfied with enthusiasm; he presses to theological realism
21–22	The people insist: we will serve the LORD; Joshua makes them witnesses against themselves — “you are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen the LORD”; they affirm	The self-witness dynamic is legally and covenantally significant — they cannot later plead ignorance or absence
23	Joshua calls them to put away foreign gods among them and incline their hearts to the LORD	This implies that foreign gods were still present among the people — the covenant renewal is not a formality but a genuine call to purge
24	The people reaffirm: we will serve the LORD and obey His voice	Third declaration — repetition marks solemnity, not redundancy
25–26	Joshua makes a covenant, gives statutes and rules, writes in the Book of the	Covenant ratification: written record, physical witness, sacred location

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
27	Law, sets up a large stone under the oak at Shechem The stone has heard all the LORD's words — it will be a witness against them if they deal falsely	The inanimate witness echoes Deuteronomy 32's Song of Moses (heaven and earth as witnesses) — cosmic accountability
28	Joshua dismisses the people to their inheritances	The covenant concluded; the people sent into their inheritance — the gift now received, the obligation now assumed
29–31	Joshua son of Nun dies at 110; buried at Timnath-serah; Israel served the LORD throughout Joshua's days and the elders who outlived him	The ominous implication: what happens after those who witnessed the acts of the LORD pass from the scene? Judges answers the question
32	The bones of Joseph buried at Shechem in the plot Jacob bought — inheritance of the sons of Joseph	Genesis 50:25 finally fulfilled — covenant faithfulness across four centuries; the long arc of God's promise-keeping
33	Eleazar son of Aaron dies; buried at Gibeah	The passing of the priestly line; the entire founding generation now gone

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–13	The LORD Speaks First: A History of Grace
2	14–15	The Summons: Choose This Day
3	16–24	The Exchange: Covenant Commitment and Counter-Pressure
4	25–28	The Ratification: Covenant Made, Witnesses Set
5	29–33	The Passing: Three Burials and the End of an Era

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: The covenant-keeping LORD demands exclusive allegiance from His people — choose now.

Primary Claim: God is pressing His people past comfortable religious affirmation to a clear-eyed, costly reckoning with what it actually means to serve the holy and jealous LORD who has redeemed them — and He will not let them coast on inherited identity or momentary enthusiasm.

Applications (Five)

1. Rehearse what God has done before you make any decision about what you will do. (*Mind/Belief*) Joshua does not open with the summons — he opens with the recital. Twelve verses of what the LORD has done come before a single imperative. The pattern is not accidental; it is structural theology. Before you can make a genuine covenant commitment, you must first know — really know, not academically but existentially — that your entire story has been shaped by grace you did not earn and gifts you did not plant. Congregants who are struggling to commit, to persevere, to choose the LORD over competing loyalties, may not primarily need more exhortation; they may need a longer look at what God has already done. Preach the recital before you preach the summons.

2. Stop treating your religious heritage or your household's faith as a substitute for your own answer. (*Affections/Worship*) Joshua's declaration — "as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD" — is not an offer for others to shelter under. It is a personal answer that exposes the absence of one. The assembly at Shechem cannot ride Joshua's decision. Every generation stands before the LORD in its own right, and the question "whom will you serve?" is addressed to you, not to your parents, not to your church tradition, not to the culture that shaped you. There is a grief-producing clarity in Joshua 24 that should unsettle anyone who has been coasting on borrowed religion — and an invitation embedded in the grief: it is not too late to make the answer your own.

3. Take Joshua's counter-challenge seriously rather than dismissing it. (*Mind/Belief*) "You are not able to serve the LORD" is the most uncomfortable sentence in the chapter precisely because it is true and because the people — and we — do not want it to be. The people push past it with a third reaffirmation. But the history that follows (Judges) confirms that Joshua was right. A healthy encounter with this passage should produce not paralysis but honest self-assessment: I cannot, on my own resources and native resolve, sustain covenant faithfulness to a holy and jealous God. That assessment is not the end of the road; it is the beginning of the right road — the one that leads to the new covenant, to the Spirit, to Christ as the only covenant-keeper on whose behalf we stand. Let the "you are not able" be felt before the solution is offered.

4. Identify and put away the foreign gods that are still among you. (*Will/Behavior*) Verse 23 reveals that even in the moment of covenant renewal, even among the assembled people of God making their declarations, foreign gods were present. Joshua does not congratulate them on their enthusiasm — he tells them to remove the idols. The application is not metaphorical first; it is concrete. What competing loyalty, competing trust, or competing source of meaning is present in your life even as you mouth covenant words? Name it specifically. The abstract call to “put away idols” is as toothless as the Israelites’ third reaffirmation without corresponding action. What would it look like, concretely, this week, to put away the specific thing that is competing with exclusive allegiance to the LORD?

5. Set up your stone — make the commitment visible, accountable, and witnessed. (*Will/Behavior*) Joshua does not let the covenant renewal remain in the emotional and verbal register. He writes it in the Book of the Law. He sets up a large stone. He makes the people witnesses against themselves. There is wisdom here that cuts against the privatized, internalized spirituality that treats faith as a purely interior matter. Covenant commitment in Scripture is consistently public, recorded, and witnessed — not because God needs the paperwork, but because we do. What would it mean for you to make your covenant commitment with the LORD visible in a way that creates real accountability? A conversation with an elder or spiritual director. A specific written commitment. A step taken in the community of the church. The stone serves a function; don’t skip it.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Joshua 24 reveals the LORD as a God who acts first and demands a response commensurate with what He has done. The historical recital is not background material — it is the theological engine of the chapter: grace precedes demand, and the demand is grounded entirely in the prior grace. The passage also reveals the holiness and jealousy of God as non-negotiable attributes that govern how covenant relationship works. He is not merely the most powerful deity among options; He is categorically different, and covenanting with Him means accepting the terms of His character, not negotiating them. The stone as witness and the people as witnesses against themselves reveal a God who takes covenant language with utter seriousness — words spoken in His presence carry legal and eschatological weight. Finally, Joshua’s counter-challenge discloses a God who is not satisfied with religious enthusiasm and who will not pretend that self-confident commitment is the same as genuine, grace-enabled covenant faithfulness.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Joshua 24 is one of the Old Testament’s most concentrated displays of the relationship between divine monergism and human

responsibility. The entire historical recital (vv. 2–13) is structured to demonstrate that Israel’s story is wholly the LORD’s work — He called, He led, He fought, He gave — and that the land they now inhabit is unearned gift from first to last. The summons that follows is therefore not Pelagian: it is a call grounded in grace, not a meritocratic demand. At the same time, Joshua’s counter-pressure in verses 19–20 is Reformed theology before the vocabulary existed: the people cannot generate from within themselves the covenant faithfulness the holy God requires. This is not a counsel of despair but a pointer — one that the canon will resolve through the new covenant, the gift of the Spirit, and ultimately the perfect covenant obedience of Christ who kept what Israel could not. Reformed exposition of this passage should not rush past Joshua’s “you are not able” to the people’s reaffirmation; it should let the incapacity stand, feel its weight, and then show how the whole biblical-theological arc provides the only answer that actually works: not human resolve but divine enablement, not covenant-keeping by the creature but covenant-keeping by the Mediator credited to His people.

Main Takeaway

The LORD has done everything first — every step of your story, every inheritance you occupy, every grace you inhabit was His doing before it was yours. Now He asks one thing: choose. Not casually, not on the strength of your enthusiasm, not sheltering under someone else’s faith. Choose with full awareness that He is holy and jealous and that the commitment you are making is beyond your natural capacity to keep — and then make it anyway, eyes open, grounded in the grace that called you, dependent on the Spirit who enables you, witnessed by the community that will hold you to it. Stop limping between two opinions. Choose this day.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Turning “as for me and my house” into a family values slogan.** Joshua 14:15 is one of the most extracted and misapplied verses in the Old Testament. It appears on wall plaques and in marriage retreats as a declaration of domestic Christian commitment — which is not wrong in itself, but it strips the verse of its covenantal urgency and its confrontational function. In context, Joshua’s declaration is a challenge to an assembly that has not yet answered, not an inspirational motto. Preach it as a summons, not a slogan.
- **Skipping or softening Joshua’s counter-challenge.** Verses 19–20 make many expositors uncomfortable because they appear to deny forgiveness and undercut the people’s sincere commitment. The temptation is to rush past them, explain them away as rhetorical device, or treat them as a brief obstacle before the covenant renewal. They are not. They are the theological center of the chapter and

Joshua's most important pastoral contribution. Spend time there. Let the incapacity claim be felt.

- **Moralistic application: “Renew your commitment to God.”** The most common sermon on Joshua 24 is essentially a rededication service — an emotional appeal to decide again, try harder, mean it this time. This misses the chapter's theological structure entirely. The recital is not background; it is the ground. Application must flow from “look at what God has done” before it can land as “now choose.” Commitment without recital produces the same result Joshua predicted: the people affirm three times and still cannot keep it.
- **Treating the chapter as a conclusion rather than a warning.** The three burials at the end — Joshua, Joseph's bones, Eleazar — create a sense of closure, and the chapter does close an era. But the ominous note of verse 31 (“Israel served the LORD all the days of Joshua and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua”) is not a celebration; it is a setup. The question the text raises is: what happens when the eyewitnesses are gone? Judges answers immediately. Preaching Joshua 24 as triumphant closure without the forward-looking shadow is historically and canonically incomplete.
- **Missing the canonical weight of Shechem.** Treating the location as incidental loses the deliberate staging of the text. Shechem carries Genesis 12, Genesis 35, and Deuteronomy 27 with it. The covenant renewal is not happening in a neutral space; it is happening at the place where the whole covenant story began in the land. The expositor who notes this gives the congregation access to the text's full theological depth; the one who skips it reduces the chapter to biography.
- **Applying verse 23 (“put away the foreign gods”) only metaphorically.** The call to concrete idol removal is frequently spiritualized so quickly that it never produces actual inventory. “Foreign gods” becomes a vague category of “competing priorities” that no one specifically names or removes. Joshua asked for concrete action; the application should press for the same. Help the congregation name, not merely acknowledge.