

Passages Worth the Dig

Joshua 24:23

“Joshua said, ‘Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your heart to the LORD, the God of Israel.’”

The 16th century French thinker François Rabelais wrote a somewhat crude satire called, *The Life of Gargantua and of Pantagruel*. In chapter five, during a discourse on drinking, Gargantua shows his empty glass and seeking more wine he proclaims, “*Natura abhorret vacuum*,” Latin for “nature abhors a vacuum.” This thought wasn’t original with Rabelais, though his phrasing is often used even today. Aristotle years before noted how a vacuum tend to attract movement because the vacuum “yields” to other items.¹

The recognition of voids being filled is not only found in the physical world, but also in the non-physical world. In 2009, the psychologist Leon Seltzer wrote, “Human nature abhors a vacuum, too.”² Seltzer wrote about how people develop habits, and too frequently vices, attempting to fill the void people sense because they miss meaning and purpose in life. Of course, Seltzer wasn’t the first to make this observation about human nature.

The brilliant French mathematician and theologian Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) wrote extensively in his relatively short life. A collection of his writings on theology and philosophical ideas was published after his death. Called *Pensees* (meaning “thoughts”), the work includes this famous insight:

What else does this craving, and this helplessness, proclaim but that there was once in man a true happiness, of which all that now remains is the empty print and trace?

This he tries in vain to fill with everything around him, seeking in things that are not there the help he cannot find in those that are, though none can help, since this infinite abyss can be filled only with an infinite and immutable object; in other words by God himself.³

Pascal realized not only that human nature abhors a vacuum, and that people typically try to fill it with inadequate means, but he went further in explaining the source of people’s meaningless and purposeless life. Pascal knew that people were made for

¹ Aristotle, *Physics*, Book IV, section 8.

² Seltzer, Leon, “Human Nature Abhors a Vacuum, Too”, *Psychology Today*, Mar. 5, 2009.

³ Pascal, Blaise, *Pensees*, (Penguin Books ed. 1966), p. 75.

something grander than meaninglessness. Pascal explained that people's drive for meaning stemmed from the truth that people were made for meaning and purpose.

This wasn't a fresh idea from Pascal. Over a millennium earlier in his *Confessions*, St. Augustine (354-430) began his most famous work explaining,

"Great art you, O Lord, and greatly to be praised; great is your power, and infinite is your wisdom." And man desires to praise you, for he is a part of your creation; he bears his mortality about with him and carries the evidence of his sin and the proof that you do resist the proud. Still he desires to praise you, this man who is only a small part of your creation. *You have prompted him, that he should delight to praise you, for you have made us for yourself and restless is our heart until it comes to rest in you* (Emphasis added).⁴

Augustine, recognized that God is at work in the midst of the longing people experience in life. Augustine was able to trace the vacuum of human nature back to original sin and its consequences, noting that God was working through the longing to draw people back to true meaning and fellowship with the Almighty. This formed the basis of his *Confessions*, an explanation of his journey from unbelief into a relationship with God.

About four-hundred years before Augustine, Jesus taught on this subject in a myriad of ways. One particular teaching recorded by Matthew and Luke adds an important concept:

When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it passes through waterless places seeking rest, and finding none it says, 'I will return to my house from which I came.' And when it comes, it finds the house swept and put in order. Then it goes and brings seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and dwell there. And the last state of that person is worse than the first." (Lk. 11:24-26).

Jesus explained to those listening that evil is at work against people. People can succumb to evil behaviors, intent, ideas, thoughts, and influences, robbing them of fruitful and truly joyful life. People can try, and even find occasional success, at ridding themselves of evil, but absent something good put in its place, one will fall even deeper back into the evil. Jesus put a practical application to the truth about people's search for meaning. Jesus gave insight into how people can not only find meaning, but live better lives having found purpose.

⁴ Augustine, *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*, Book One, Chap. 1, verse 1.

For Jesus, the human cry for purpose, meaning, and fulfillment include some of life's deepest philosophical questions. But he took it into personal choices and explained the effect the emptiness can produce in a person.

Some may see this as the problem of "others," rather than themselves. But this is a universal truth and problem. No one effectively lives without dealing with the emptiness of life – whether deliberately or by default. Consider some different buckets into which people can be classified.



Some people may want to ignore the buckets. Among those some simply fill their lives with evil and live. These people are in bucket one above. Other well-intentioned folks may see the destructiveness that flows from evil choices and work to get their houses in order, get rid of bad habits, then seeking to be happy simply to "live each day" (bucket two). However, as the teaching of Jesus emphasized, such folks will still be open to the negative influences that will ultimately come to capitalize the vacuum in their lives. They may fight to clean up bad habits, but bad habits will still win out, unless something positive sets up residence. Jesus understood that humanity's drive for meaning cannot be ignored without consequences. There is a human need for fulfillment, and without it, life will never be what it could and should be.

The Passage

This idea wasn't new with Jesus. Jesus was speaking of a principle that is a truth of life, and as such the truth had been around in solid teaching for thousands of years. Consider in this light the passage worth digging into today:

He said, "Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your heart to the LORD, the God of Israel." (Josh. 24:23).

This passage is in the context of Joshua addressing the people of Israel at the end of Joshua's life. Joshua had been a transitional leader for Israel, taking over leadership from Moses near the end of Moses' life. With Joshua as general, Israel had gone a long way toward conquering the Promised Land. Israel still had work to do as a nation, as a collective whole. But every one of the Israelites were not just part of a national concern. Each person was also an individual. As an individual, each person had personal accountability and choices. In more modern speak, each person had to address the vacuum that exists in life as a default, barring the effective filling of that hole.

Even before Joshua's speech, the people and their immediate forebearers had seen the effect of individual choice on the fate of people, families, and the nation. These Israelites had lived in slavery in Egypt. God rescued them from that slavery, but some were not happy with their lives afterward. They wanted more. Some tried to create gods that would satisfy their longings, and the golden calf incident occurred. (Ex. 32). That did not turn out well, and a plague devoured those who were hungry for their own visible god.

While on the exodus, some dealt with their daily drive for fulfillment and happiness by grumbling and complaining about their lot in life. They thought God wasn't meeting their deepest desire (abundant and fresh water) and rather than seeking it from God honestly and openly through prayer, the people used the chance to rail on God and Moses, expressing their displeasure and discontent by hurling invectives and accusations. This sinful reaction gave the name of one particular place "Massah" and "Meribah," or "temptation" and "murmuring." It became famous in Israel as an expression of humanity's improper discontent with a merciful God.⁵

Confronted with the Promised Land and God's assurance of victory, one generation missed out because of a failure to find the purpose God had for them in living faithfully under his direction, conquering the seeming giants that stood before them. That didn't turn out well (Num. 13-14). Another generation tried to fill their lives with treasure that wasn't theirs, rather than filling their lives with the fruit of obedience to God. That didn't turn out well either (Josh. 7).

Having lived through many such experiences, Joshua was giving important last counsel to the Israelites. He explained they all had choices. Their choices centered on which god they would follow. The choices stemmed from where they would find their meaning and direction in life. The people could choose to experience the true God as fully as possible, or they could love polluted by the inadequate gods of their neighbors. The people told Joshua they were choosing the true God, and Joshua then gave his confirmed instructions

⁵ The story is found in Exodus 17, but the references to it in the Bible are plentiful. See, e.g., Deut. 6:16; 9:22; 33:8; Ps. 78:20; 95:8; 105:41.

how to follow through on such a commitment. The instruction reads plainly in most any translation, but the Hebrew text adds layers of understanding to it. The English Standard Version reads,

He said, “Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your heart to the LORD, the God of Israel.”

The New International Version is similar,

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

The King James Version reads,

Now therefore put away, said he, the strange gods which are among you, and incline your heart unto the Lord God of Israel.

The original Hebrew reads,

וְעַתָּה הִסִּירוּ אֶת־אֱלֹהֵי הַנֹּכַר אֲשֶׁר בְּקִרְבְּכֶם וְהִטּוּ אֶת־לְבַבְכֶם אֶל־
יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל

The Hebrew is worth digging into!

The Dig

WARNING: GRAMMAR FOLLOWS! IF GRAMMAR IS TOO DAUNTING, SKIM LIGHTLY WITH NO WORRIES! THE THRUST OF THE GRAMMAR WILL COME OUT LATER IN THE LESSON! FEEL FREE TO READ LIGHTLY UNTIL GETTING TO MY “RESUMING THE DIG” SECTION!

Grammar:

To modern English speakers, Hebrew verbs are strange things. In modern English our verbs prominently feature “tense.” This means we can take a verb like “eat” and put it into twelve different tenses. The four present tenses are:

- I “eat” (the “simple present”);
- I “am eating” (the “continuous present”);
- I “have eaten” (the “perfect present”); and,
- I “have been eating” (the “perfect continuous present”).

The four past tenses are:

- I “ate” (the “simple past”);
- I “was eating” (the “continuous past”);
- I “had eaten” (the “perfect past”); and,
- I “had been eating” (the “perfect continuous past”).

The four future tenses are

- I “will eat” (the “simple future”);
- I “will be eating” (the “continuous future”);
- I “will have eaten” (the “perfect future”); and,
- I “will have been eating” (the “perfect continuous future”).

Many people will not be able to simply write out those English tenses, or for many it may take some thinking, but the idea of tenses in English are fundamental to using the language and for many simply are a natural part of speaking.

Not so with Ancient Hebrew! At the risk of oversimplifying a difficult language, Biblical Hebrew expressed the twelve English verb tenses through mainly two tense forms– the “perfect” and the “imperfect.” However, those Hebrew verbs are marked by another set of forms that are somewhat strange to modern English. In Biblical Hebrew these verb forms are shaped upon the *type of action* the verb conveys.

So in Hebrew, the verb “know” can be written in multiple different forms to show the type of eating that is meant. This will cover whether one means:

- I “eat” (the simple “qal” form);
- I “chow down!!!” (the “piel” form giving – typically means *intensity* in the type of eating done);
- I “make people eat” or “I feed” (the “hifil” form typically meaning *causing* the action of the verb);
- I “make myself fed” (the “hitpael” form typically making the verb *reflexive*);
- I “was fed” (the “nifal” form typically making the verb *passive*);
- I “was stuffed!” (the “pual” form typically meaning *reflexive* as well as *intensive*); and,
- I “was made to be fed” (the “hofal” form typically denoting the ideas of *passive* and *causing* of the verb’s action);

The above is truly an over-simplification, but it provides a basic framework for understanding an element of translating Hebrew verbs in modern Bible versions. Applying this understanding to the passage at issue opens up an important teaching.

Resuming the dig:

The Joshua 24:23 passage has two key verbs at play. The first is “*sur*” (סַר). At its basic form (the “*qal*”), the verb denotes turning aside from one’s course. It can be found in passages like Moses’ encounter with God in the burning bush:

And Moses said, “I will turn aside (*sur*) to see this great sight, why the bush is not burned.” When the LORD saw that he turned aside (*sur*) to see, God called to him out of the bush, “Moses, Moses!” And he said, “Here I am.” (Ex. 3:3-4).

In contrast to a simple “turning aside” (the “*qal*” form), the verb is also frequently used in the sense of causing the “turning aside” (the “*hifil*” form). A contrast in the two forms is easily found in the Exodus story of the plague of frogs. Consider this passage:

Then Pharaoh called Moses and Aaron and said, “Plead with the LORD to take away (*sur*) the frogs from me and from my people, and I will let the people go to sacrifice to the LORD.” (Ex. 8:8)

The frogs shall go away (*sur*) from you and your houses and your servants and your people. They shall be left only in the Nile. (Ex. 8:11)

In the first passage (Ex. 8:8) Pharaoh’s request is in the “causing” form (the “*hifil*”). So Pharaoh is asking Moses to have God *cause* the frogs to turn aside. This is given by the translators as having God “take them away” – an action of causing them to leave. Then in verse eleven, the text reads that the frogs did in fact “go away.” This fact is conveyed by the simple verb form (the “*qal*”) that denotes the action of the frogs leaving. (NOTE: the text is NOT indicating the frogs left of their own accord! It is clear God caused them to leave, but the verb form notes that once God caused it, it happened!)

Taking this deep dive into the verb form of *sur* found in the Joshua passage, one can read something notable in the Hebrew.

Joshua said, ‘Then put away [*sur*] the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your heart to the LORD, the God of Israel.’

Joshua uses the “causing” for (the “hifal”) in his instruction. Joshua is telling the Israelites they are to be the agent behind causing the foreign gods to be removed. Quite literally, they are to “remove and cause to be gone those foreign gods that are in their midst.”

A second verb is then placed in Joshua’s instruction – translated in the English Standard Version as “incline.” The Hebrew verb is *natah* (נָטָה). It’s most basic form conveys the idea of spreading or stretching out. In Genesis, it is used for Abraham “stretching out” or “pitching” his tent (Gen. 12:8). It is a touching verb used in the story of Joseph’s imprisonment when God showed Joseph compassion. Genesis 39:21 reads, “But the LORD was with Joseph and showed him [*natah* – God spread out or stretched out a showing of compassion and loyalty] steadfast love and gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison.”

Again, in a parallel fashion, Joshua used the causing form (the “hifal”) of this verb *natah* in the passage under study. Joshua told the people to be the cause of the stretching out, or extending their hearts to God. This denotes a deliberateness. The people are supposed to deliberately apply themselves to pursuing God.

A final note of importance in digging into this passage before looking at practical applications is the Hebrew word “heart.” The translators correctly translate the organ referenced by Joshua (the heart), but do so at the expense of the fullest meaning for Joshua. To the ancient Hebrews, the heart was the seat of thought, not so much the seat of emotions made popular in today’s Valentine’s Day era. The ancients thought of the guts as the seat of emotions, but the heart as the seat of thought. So Joshua’s instructions for the Hebrews to cause their “hearts” to be extended toward God, was an instruction for them to turn their minds to God!

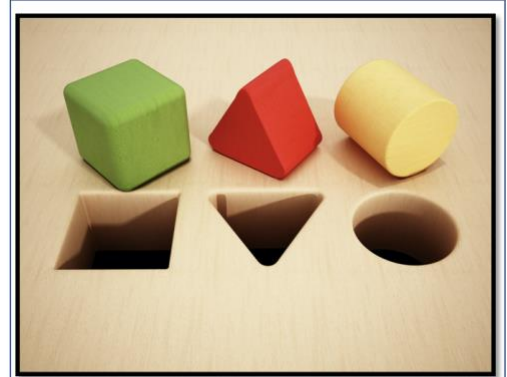
So What?

Set aside the technicalities of verbs, Hebrew vocabulary, and observations of Blaise Pascal. What practical difference does this study offer in day-to-day life? Plenty! This study offers insight into living in a way that generates joy, fulfillment, maturity, peace, patience, kindness, and love. How? By applying the principles taught in these scriptures.

The summation of teaching on this point is found in understanding that people have an inherent desire and need for meaning and purpose. That need will drive people to mental and physical activity. Whether consciously or unconsciously people make choices built around trying to satisfy longings. The problem is that many, if not most, of the choices aren’t adequate for truly meeting the desperate need for meaning.

This search for meaning includes a need for being loved and accepted. It includes a need for being useful and and important, even if in a small way.

The teachings of scripture explain that in trying to fill the vacuum, many need to make smart choices. The decision is not one of whether to follow God, but which god to follow. One can spread out their arms (and life) to the pagan gods that won't satisfy ultimately, or one can embrace the God who does. Defaulting in that choice doesn't mean no choice is made. It means the choice for god is the default – the pagan gods of the masses. The default god becomes the god of the moment.



Too many people try to fill the hole of meaningful life with actions that aren't ever going to fit the hole. The drive for meaning is a drive for a relationship with God. Only in that relationship will one find purpose and meaning fulfilled in a way that produces a deep and abiding peace and contentment.

The truth of this scriptural concept goes beyond simply choosing which god one will follow in life. It extends into what choices are made beyond the "life choice" of following God or not. Jesus's principle of the house swept clean needing life inside also applies to the choices Christians make and how Christians live. These choices of daily life aren't simply what one does or fails to do. It includes how one thinks.

In dealing with internal thoughts, Christians have a moment-by-moment choice about how they will let God mold their life or whether the gods of the world get to hold sway. Jesus explained the importance of these thoughts within. This forms the center of Jesus's teaching that murder itself isn't the only sin, but that hatred in the heart brings forth murderous acts. Hatred needs to be dealt with. Matthew 5:21,22 records Jesus explaining,

You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment.

Similarly, Jesus's first concern wasn't sexual immorality expressed in the act of adultery, but what went on before that act in one's mind.

In Matthew 5:27-28 Jesus explained,

You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

In explaining the sins that affect someone negatively, Jesus taught his disciples that rather than focusing on something as trivial as washing their hands, they should focus on these issues of what one thinks about. Issues of the mind matter.

For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person. But to eat with unwashed hands does not defile anyone.” (Mt. 15:19-20)

If one reads these passages and thinks, “Well, I don’t want to be a murderer, adulterer, sexually immoral, thief. So I will just say no to such thoughts!” one is set up for failure. Human nature abhors a vacuum! One needs to fill one’s mind with good things. Joshua never told Israel to simply cause the pagan gods to leave. Israel was also to fill their lives with the true God. Jesus never expected a demon cast out to allow one to have a clean house. All it meant is that if a godly spirit didn’t take up residence, the evil spirit would return in full force.

Paul explained it to the Philippians with clear instructions for day to day thinking. Get rid of the negative and put the positive in its place. Paul didn’t simply tell the Philippians not to worry, but to prayerfully lay their concerns before God.

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Phil. 4:6-7).

Similarly, Paul didn’t tell the Philippians to quit thinking about bad things, but he told them to fill their minds with good things.

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me— practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you. (Phil. 4:8-9)

Humanity is wildly consistent. People need meaning and purpose – daily and eternally. God offers that, but everyone needs to reach out and choose it. I can choose to live in default mode, or I can choose to live deliberately, seeking to fill my mind and life with the God of peace and truth. That is worth digging into scripture to see, and worth implementing in life to experience! May God give me such grace.