

## 1 Does Relativism Work?

JOSHUA 24:14-28

What is true must correspond to reality; otherwise, it is false. Therefore if *truth* means anything at all, *it must exclude something*—namely, *falsehood*.

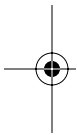
### ■ OPEN

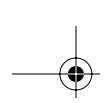
When did you first learn that Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny weren't real? How did you respond to the news?

### ■ STUDY

The book of Joshua records Israel's entry into and sojourn in the Promised Land, after many years of bondage in Egypt and wandering without a home. As his days on earth are waning, Joshua assembles the people to renew the covenant God established with them through Moses at Mount Sinai. The prophet reminds his audience of God's long faithfulness to them. In this section of the covenant, the LORD God sets an explicit choice before his people: You must choose whom you will serve. ***Read Joshua 24:14-28.***

*<sup>14</sup>“Now fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your forefathers worshiped beyond the River and in*





Egypt, and serve the LORD. <sup>15</sup>But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.”

<sup>16</sup>Then the people answered, “Far be it from us to forsake the LORD to serve other gods! <sup>17</sup>It was the LORD our God himself who brought us and our fathers up out of Egypt, from that land of slavery, and performed those great signs before our eyes. He protected us on our entire journey and among all the nations through which we traveled. <sup>18</sup>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.”

<sup>19</sup>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. <sup>20</sup>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.”

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

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

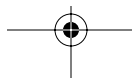
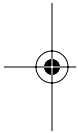
“Yes, we are witnesses,” they replied.

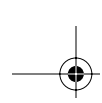
<sup>23</sup>“Now then,” said Joshua, “throw away the foreign gods that are among you and yield your hearts to the LORD, the God of Israel.”

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

<sup>25</sup>On that day Joshua made a covenant for the people, and there at Shechem he drew up for them decrees and laws. <sup>26</sup>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.

<sup>27</sup>“See!” he said to all the people. “This stone will be a witness



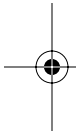


*against us. It has heard all the words the LORD has said to us. It will be a witness against you if you are untrue to your God.”*

*<sup>28</sup>Then Joshua sent the people away, each to his own inheritance.*

1. Note the number of times the verb *serve* appears in this passage. Why do you think this word is repeated so often? What emotions does it elicit for you?

2. What choice is offered in verse 15?

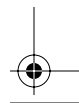
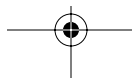
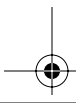


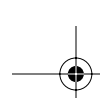
How does it affirm the character of God and his covenant?



3. What do you make of Joshua's response in verse 19: "You are not able to serve the LORD"? If you were standing before Joshua, how might you respond to his charge?

4. "Jealous" is usually understood negatively, yet in the context of an exclusive relationship such as marriage it is important





to be jealous of certain boundaries and commitments. How does this example apply to verses 19 and 20?

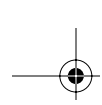
A 1994 poll by the Barna Group revealed that 72 percent of American adults—that’s almost three out of four—agreed with the statement that there is “no such thing as absolute truth; two people could define truth in totally conflicting ways, but both still be correct.”

That’s what *relativism* is: A belief can be true for one person but not for another. “If you believe that Christianity is right for you, that’s fine. I’m glad it works for you. I just happen to believe differently. But I’m not going to say that you’re wrong,” the relativist will declare.

We can ask the relativist: “Do you believe that relativism is true? If it’s true, is it *absolutely* true for everyone, or is it just true for you?” Now if the relativist says that his view is true for *everyone*, then it is no longer relative but absolute. Thus the view is self-contradictory and therefore false.

But what if the relativist says, “This is just my view; it’s just true for me, and you don’t have to believe it”? Well, if *this* is the relativist’s position, then what he is saying is on the same level of asserting, “Vanilla ice cream tastes better to you, but chocolate tastes better to me.” So the relativist is saying *nothing* that is worthy of being believed by another; he is just giving his own opinion. But usually relativists believe they are giving more than their own opinion. In fact, the famous relativistic slogan—“That’s true for *you*, but not for *me*”—presupposes that relativism applies to at least *two people*! The relativist believes that relativism is true for *both* parties, not just one.





5. Define relativism in your own words.

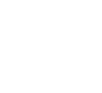
6. In what ways is relativism self-contradictory?

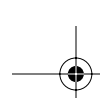
The logical system is built on four fundamental laws, laws that are impossible to argue against without at the same time proving them. For the sake of brevity, let me discuss just two of them.

First is the Law of Noncontradiction. This law affirms that no two contradictory statements can be both true and false at the same time in the same sense. To deny the Law of Noncontradiction is only to affirm it, for to say that the Law of Noncontradiction is not true is to assume that the denial is true and the law is not. But that is precisely what the law says—that two contradictory statements cannot both be true. There is no way to get around this.

The second foundational law is the Law of Rational Inference. By that we mean that inferences can be made from what is known to what is unknown. No one could prove any point without the Law of Rational Inference. There are conclusions that may be legitimately drawn when statements are true and the argument containing those statements is valid. . . .

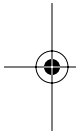
In short, therefore, truth boils down to two tests: Statements must correspond to reality, and any system of thought that is developed as a result must be coherent. The correspondence and coherence tests are applied by all of us in matters that affect us.





Therefore, when Jesus said, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No man comes to the father except through me,” He was making a very reasonable statement by affirming truth’s exclusivity. The question one may legitimately ask is whether He demonstrated that claim rather than just stating it.<sup>1</sup>

7. How does the Law of Noncontradiction reveal the inconsistency of relativism?



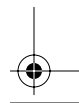
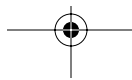
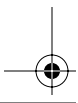
8. In what ways has relativism misinformed our understanding of religious belief?

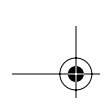


9. What does it mean to say that truth is, by definition, exclusive?

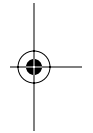
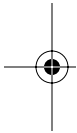
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<sup>1</sup>Ravi Zacharias, *Deliver Us from Evil: Resorting the Soul in a Disintegrating Culture* (Dallas: Word, 1996), pp. 220-21.





10. Look again at verses 14-15 and 19-20. How does the idea that truth necessarily excludes help us to comprehend the character of God depicted in these verses?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
11. How might an understanding of the inconsistency of relativism and the inescapability of absolute truth assist you today in your own spiritual journey?



### ■ GOING FURTHER

Spend some time thinking and perhaps journaling about your response to question 11. Make a note of questions that you may want to revisit or talk to someone about after completing this booklet.

#### *Additional Reading*

For one of the best discussions on the question of relativism and absolute truth, see the first section of C. S. Lewis's classic book *Mere Christianity*, "Right and Wrong as a Clue to the Meaning in the Universe."

