

# The Gospel: Choice or Command?

*Book of Joshua*

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Please take your Bibles and look with me in Joshua 24 and you'll see as I read from verse 14 and I'll read down to verse 18, but as the Lord directs, just speak with you primarily from verse 14. But you'll see the parallel that there is here with what we just read in Deuteronomy 6, to fear the Lord and to serve him and the title of this message is that simply: "The Gospel, is it a Choice or is it a Command?" Let's see what we find here in Joshua 24:14,

"14 Now therefore fear the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in truth: and put away the gods which your fathers served on the other side of the flood, and in Egypt; and serve ye the LORD. 15 And if it seem evil unto you to serve the LORD, choose you this day whom ye will serve; whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the flood, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land ye dwell: but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD. 16 And the people answered and said, God forbid that we should forsake the LORD, to serve other gods; 17 For the LORD our God, he it is that brought us up and our fathers out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage, and which did those great signs in our sight, and preserved us in all the way wherein we went, and among all the people through whom we passed: 18 And the LORD drove out from before us all the people, even the Amorites which dwelt in the land: therefore will we also serve the LORD; for he is our God."

People, by nature, like choices. They like to be able to make decisions about things for themselves and I would have to say, present company not excluded. When going to buy a car or to buy a house or even in a restaurant, a menu selection, even with a limited menu selection, no one likes to be told what to eat. Can you imagine going into a restaurant and sitting down and there's this menu in front of you and the cook comes out and says, "Well, this is what you're going to eat if you're sitting here?" People resist that; they want to be able to make a choice. Unless, and here's the key here, through the course of events and time and by God's direction, one becomes destitute. How often have we said to someone, "Beggars aren't choosers." And I believe this is one of our problems in life is because we become prideful and arrogant and presumptuous even with regard to things pertaining to the Lord and somehow begin to imagine that it's for something in us or by

some entitlement. Even grace can be presented as an entitlement to what the Lord does and doesn't do and therein our flesh would go were it not for the Lord keeping us.

So, the Lord brings famine. It's the Lord who renders sinners destitute. Can you imagine somebody with a terminal illness that's just been told they have three weeks to live and the doctor is sitting there hemming and hawing and saying, "Well, what do you think?" At that particular point, a person in that state doesn't want the choice. "You're the physician; you're the one who knows. You determine what is the best for us." And I say that because in this matter of serving the Lord, in this matter of salvation, we don't want the choice. If God were to leave the choice to us, we would most certainly never choose him. We would never serve him. So, how we need his grace.

I think of Israel and as I read for you here, this description of being brought up out of Egypt in verse 17 of Joshua 24. "And the people answered and said, God forbid that we should forsake the LORD, to serve other gods." And that is true, where he has delivered us in Christ, God forbid that we should ever renounce him, but let's remember how it is that we've been brought to him. Verse 17 gives him all the glory, "For the LORD our God, he it is that brought us up and our fathers out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage, and which did those great signs in our sight, and," what? "preserved us in all the way wherein we went, and among all the people through whom we passed." That is the testimony of one who has been delivered by God's grace.

But you stop and think about how the Lord brought them out of the land of Egypt. The Lord brought them to despair of themselves. If you remember, back in Exodus 14, look with me there. Look at verse 8. Here's an example of how the Lord will bring those that he delivers to despair of themselves. He put them in a straight way for one reason: that they not put any confidence in the flesh and that they again cry unto him and acknowledge that salvation is of the Lord. It says in verse 8, "And the LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh king of Egypt." You see, "he saves whom he will and he hardens whom he wills" is how Paul was directed to write it in the letter to the Romans. "The LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh king of Egypt, and he pursued after the children of Israel: and the children of Israel went out with an high hand." Whose high hand? It wasn't theirs. It was the Lord's high hand delivering. They were nothing before Pharaoh and his army.

Verse 9, "But the Egyptians pursued after them, all the horses and chariots of Pharaoh, and his horsemen, and his army, and overtook them encamping by the sea, beside Pihahiroth, before Baalzephon." These are both places where there was idolatrous worship. "And when Pharaoh drew nigh, the children of Israel lifted up their eyes, and, behold, the Egyptians marched after them; and," what? "they were sore afraid: and the children of Israel cried out unto the LORD. And they said unto Moses, Because there were no graves in Egypt, hast thou taken us away to die in the wilderness? wherefore hast thou dealt thus with us, to carry us forth out of Egypt? Is not this the word that we did tell thee in Egypt, saying, Let us alone, that we may serve the Egyptians? For it had been better for us to serve the Egyptians, than that we should die in the wilderness." It's amazing what pops out a heart when squeezed. There is no goodness and the Lord did

this to show that if this people was to be delivered, it was not for any merit in them. How they needed that Passover Lamb; how they needed for God to look upon that blood where it says, “When I see the blood I will pass over you.” It’s not “when I see your goodness,” not “when I see your decision,” not “when I see your faith,” but “when I see the blood.”

And the Lord brought them to this point, why? Verse 13, “And Moses said unto the people, Fear ye not,” and this is what I want us to consider, the difference between this fear and what it is over in Joshua 24, “Now, therefore, fear the LORD.” There is a fear of man which is a snare. There is a fear of circumstances, there is a fear that would overwhelm our heart not given the eyes to look to Christ alone. When you consider God’s law, when you consider our sin and you consider his holiness and our wretchedness, there is a fear and yet Moses declares to this people, “Fear ye not, stand still, and see the salvation of the LORD, which he will shew to you to day: for the Egyptians whom ye have seen to day, ye shall see them again no more for ever. The LORD shall fight for you, and ye shall hold your peace.”

So, we see here some very specific commands that are given to us with reference to God and this is particularly to his people. And because of that, we really aren’t going to make it much farther than verse 14 of Joshua 24. Again, looking at this particular subject, “The Gospel, a Choice or a Command?” Well, very clearly it’s not a choice, it’s a command. There are some preachers we’ve heard and we hear people talking this way, that it’s up to you, here are your options. That might work for a menu, that might work for buying a car and determining the color of that car or what kind of house you want to dwell in but we know that even in those, ultimately it’s the Lord that determines. But when it comes to this matter of salvation, one who clearly and faithfully declares the gospel does so as a command.

We recently saw on the news where the birth of royalty was announced over in England and I don’t know whether you saw it but there was some gentleman dressed up in a funny uniform and looking official that came out and he had a big old scroll in his hand and he was commissioned by the royal family to declare and announce the birth of that child. And I noticed one thing: he wasn’t ad-libbing. Everything he said was taken right off a script that was declared and it was with “Hear ye! Hear ye!” And that is exactly what we see here with regard to Joshua addressing these here in verse 14. When you see, “Now therefore,” what’s the therefore, there for? Well, in verse 13, just as we just read in Deuteronomy 6, this is not something that they have earned or merited to enter into this land. He said, “I have given you a land for which ye did not labour, and cities which ye built not, and ye dwell in them; of the vineyards and oliveyards which ye planted not do ye eat.” That parallels what we saw in Deuteronomy 6.

“Now therefore,” in light of this, we actually see here four commands. It says, “fear the Lord,” there is not a begging here of “if you will, please fear the Lord,” but “fear the Lord.” That’s the first command. The second command that we see is “serve him in sincerity and in truth,” not “if you will, please serve him,” or “God would like you to serve him, so please don’t disappoint him.” That’s not how it’s presented, “serve him in sincerity and in truth.” Thirdly, we see “put away the gods which your fathers served on

the other side of the flood and in Egypt.” And then, the final command again, “serve ye the Lord.”

I'd like to look at these four command with you as they pertain to the gospel because they are gospel commands. The first one here: “now therefore fear the Lord.” If you look this word up, it has different meanings depending on the context but certainly, 1. to fear or be afraid. Actually, it can mean “to terrify; to be terrified of serving or approaching unto God in any other way than he has commanded.” Now, if you ask me what's the number one problem today in our nation and around the world, it is this even as it was in Paul's day where he declared it in Romans 3:18 that “there is no fear of God before their eyes.” The trivialness with which men speak of God and talk of him and address him and change his name to fit circumstances. You and I have both been in such situations with invocations that we've heard. It's so generic and it's purposed to be that way so as not to offend. There is no fear of God before their eyes. Certainly, if God by his grace has been pleased to teach anything of himself, there is that fear, that terror, if you will, of approaching him in any other way than through the one sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ alone. Men ought to fear. To stand before a holy God without a ransom, without a mediator or somehow think that they're going to address a holy God as sinners without knowing and understanding that they have sinned, “We have sinned and come short of the glory of God.” Nothing less than absolute righteousness will do. A righteousness that God himself cannot lower his standard. A righteousness that is absolutely in line with who he is as God.

“Now therefore fear the Lord.” But it also, depending on the context, can mean to stand in awe of. I know that that word is thrown around today where people look at something and say, “Awesome!” and it has nothing to do with what the true sense of the word is. Now, for one who is not in Christ, the fear of God ought to be the fear of judgment, of eternal condemnation, because that's what awaits any whom the Lord has not redeemed. There is that waiting for that judgment, that eternal judgment of God of which the Scriptures speak. If you look over in Hebrews 10:31 you'll see it described in this way. This is what men are blind to, but here in Hebrews 10:31, it says, “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” It's a fearful thing but where is that fear in the hearts of men? Because they're blind, they don't see it yet but they will unless Christ has redeemed that.

But for one who is the Lord's, this fear, when Joshua says, “Therefore fear the Lord,” it's not a cowering in that sense, but it has to do with being awed with him, in reverence. And, certainly, over here in the book of Hebrews, in chapter 12, we see that. Hebrews 12:26 and it says, “Whose voice then shook the earth,” in other words, it's speaking about that holiness that was seen there when the law was given in the Old Testament. “But now he hath promised, saying, Yet once more I shake not the earth only, but also heaven.” This is symbolic language. It is as if heaven now was shaken, split open, because from heaven descended now the Savior to answer that law, to go to battle and to bear the sin of that people that God has purposed to save. “And this word,” verse 27, “Yet once more, signifieth the removing of those things that are shaken.” You see, all of the Old Testament law and the types, all of those were designed to be shaken. They were

temporary. “As of things that are made, that those things which cannot be shaken may remain.” If you want a good reason not to trust in the flesh and not to believe that somehow salvation is dependent on our keeping the law, just take a look at Israel. The command was given, but there wasn’t any that could obey and the Lord destroyed them but now, those things which cannot be shaken may remain. What are those things? That’s what Christ established; that’s that righteousness that he came and worked out and earned and established and God imputed to the account of his church, those for whom Christ died.

Verse 28, “Wherefore we receiving a kingdom.” All these words are important. It doesn’t say “meriting a kingdom,” but “receiving.” That’s something that is given, that you have received and it’s not even as we’ve heard it said, “Well, you still have to put out the hand to receive it.” No, it’s been put to our account even before we ever knew anything about it because it was put to that account when Christ died. So, “Receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved.” What are those things that cannot be shaken, that remain? Well, it’s being forgiven completely of our sins, a debt entirely paid. It’s to be justified before a holy God. Nothing can undo that. Dear friend, not even our sin can undo it. That’s an amazing thing when you stop and think about it. And this is what evokes that fear, that awe, that awesomeness of God. Who is a God like him? That would pardon sin? And take it and bury it in the deepest part of the sea never to be remembered anymore? That’s what it’s speaking of, this kingdom “which cannot be moved, let us have grace.” You see, it’s his grace, unmerited favor, “whereby,” what? “We may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear.” That’s the fear of which Joshua speaks here when he says, “Now therefore fear the Lord and serve him in sincerity and truth.”

So, we see that this fear is one of awe, but it’s one of reverence, it’s one of honor, it’s one of respect. Not a servile fear but one of sonship and God’s Word clearly teaches that that’s how those approach unto him whom the Lord has saved. It is consistent with God’s love. You say, “How do you match up God’s love and his holiness?” Well, we don’t but God did. His love did not set aside his holiness and his holiness in no way sets aside his love. There is a meeting of that love and holiness in the person of his Son for grace and truth have met together, righteousness and peace have kissed one another. It’s in the Mediator and that’s why John wrote there in 1 John 4:18 that “perfect love casts out all fear.” We don’t have perfect love but his is perfect because he has accomplished this work on behalf of his people.

So, there’s the first command: fear the Lord. And if the Lord has so taught us of his grace and pointed our eyes to the Lord Jesus Christ, that’s what we do. It’s in response to his great work on our behalf. The second command we see here in verse 14 of Joshua 24 is to “serve him in sincerity and in truth.” And here, again, it’s interesting to study words in their particular context because the word is the word “to work or labor” so if you just stop there, you’re thinking, “Okay, well, this seems like a contradiction because you just said it’s by grace and now it says serve him in the sense of work or labor.” Well, we know there’s a labor of love of which the Scriptures speak, but there is even, as you look at this word throughout the Scriptures, you find a very interesting context of it and it has to do with serving the Lord, laboring unto the Lord. It had to do, particularly, with the Levitical

priests who served the Lord night and day in the tabernacle. So, it's in connection with worship and that makes sense as we look at this particular context because when the Lord said "serve him in sincerity and in truth" one might also read that "worship him in sincerity and truth, come in the way that God has ordained" just like Abel came through that blood sacrifice and not as Cain who sought another way and was, therefore, rejected. So, it's in this context.

If you look over in Exodus 10, I want you to see this is the beauty, this is what I see as the scarlet thread that runs through Scripture. Every Scripture, every portion is connected in some way. Even these commands are connected in some way to the Lord Jesus Christ and to his accomplished work at Calvary. It leads us to him, draws us to him, points us to him. Here in Exodus 10:25 and 26, it seems like a simple demand of Moses in verse 25, "And Moses said, Thou must give us also sacrifices and burnt offerings, that we may sacrifice unto the LORD our God." When Pharaoh said there in verse 24 unto Moses, "Go ye, serve the LORD," see, there's the word, "only let your flocks and your herds be stayed: let your little ones also go with you." What was he saying? You can go ahead, but just don't take any animals with you. Well, that would be like saying, "Well, we can come to God by Christ but all we really need is sincerity in coming to God by Christ." Whoa, wait a minute because Joshua 24:14 says "serve him in sincerity and truth." That's where we see this here: you cannot have Christ without his sacrifice. Paul said, "I determine not to know anything among you save Jesus Christ and," what? "Him crucified." That would be like us saying, "Well, we can have Jesus Christ. Let's don't argue over his death, let's don't make distinction as long as we all agree that salvation is by Christ." That's what Pharaoh was saying, "Go serve him but just leave your animals here."

Moses said, "Thou must give us also sacrifices and burnt offerings, that we may sacrifice unto the LORD our God." Look at here, verse 26, "Our cattle also shall go with us." He wasn't negotiating. There is no compromise when it comes to the gospel; there is no choosing this or that as if it's a smorgasbord. It's one complete gospel and it's Christ and him crucified. "There shall not an hoof be left behind." I like the way the Lord directed Moses to say it, "not one hoof." "For thereof must we take to serve the LORD our God; and we know not with what we must serve the LORD, until we come thither. But the LORD hardened Pharaoh's heart, and he would not let them go."

So, you see why I say here in Joshua 24:14, this is not just "work at it, to ahead an labor for the Lord." As you hear people say, "Well, that so-and-so really labored for the Lord, didn't they?" I'll tell you what, if they didn't come to him through the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ alone and that was what they declared, then they'll hear the Lord say unto them, "Depart from me ye workers of iniquity, I never knew you." I'm talking about people that have sacrificed their lives overseas and in supposed mission works. There is a multitude, there are many that have gone out into the world, John says, many antichrists. To be antichrist is to be a Cain, to be Cain with his offering, but he did not serve the Lord in sincerity and in truth.

Look at the connection over here. This is amazing, in 1 Corinthians 5:8. Do you suppose that the Apostle Paul had this particular portion in mind when he stated this? Look at 1 Corinthians beginning with verse 6, and there are many ways to apply this, “Your glorying is not good.” To glory in any other way in coming before the Lord God is not good. “Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump?” Isn’t that where it begins? When people begin to say, “Well, it really doesn’t matter. Let’s not argue over Christ’s death and its design and for whom he died and what it accomplished. It’s too divisive. Let’s leave it alone.” A little leaven leavens the whole lump. He says, “Purge out therefore the old leaven,” which would have to do with any thought, not just work but thought, that is contrary to Christ getting all the glory. “That ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened. For even Christ our passover is sacrificed for us.” That’s key: Christ and his sacrifice. “Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven,” of works or man’s will, “neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness,” which is what leaven is, it’s any supposed righteousness, approaching unto God in our way is malice and wickedness, and here it is, “but with the unleavened bread of,” what? “Sincerity and truth.”

Same language as we see back here in Joshua 24:14, “and serve him,” worship him, minister before him, that’s what that word “labor” is. It’s not a labor of regret but it is a labor of love. Let us worship him “in sincerity and truth.” That word “sincerity” is the word “perfection.” Well, how is it that we’re going to worship him in perfection other than worshiping through his Son who is perfection. When it says “in truth” it’s actually the word, it comes from the idea of stability; that which can stand against any shock or blow, is what that word is. I think of what Paul wrote to the Colossians over here in Colossians 1:23 where he speaks of the heart being established and settled. Look at it, Colossians 1. Notice in verse 21, “And you, that were sometime alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now hath he reconciled,” how? “In the body of his flesh through death,” the death of Christ, “to present you holy and unblameable and unproveable in his sight.” And it says, “If ye continue in the faith,” what? “grounded and settled,” that’s the truth, “and be not moved away from the hope of the gospel, which ye have heard, and which was preached to every creature which is under heaven; whereof I Paul am made a minister,” a laborer. “This is how I worship. This is the way, what men call a sect,” he said, “is the way that I worship God.”

So, that’s the gospel command, not only to fear the Lord in reverence but to serve him in sincerity and truth. Then, thirdly, down here in Joshua 24, we see the third command: “and put away the gods which your fathers served on the other side of the flood and in Egypt.” Simply put: that word “to put away” means “to turn aside; to depart from; to remove; to completely leave alone; to reject.” That’s pretty strong language. In other words, no compromise.

If you look over in 1 Thessalonians 1:9, there is no middle ground. I was speaking about this recently with someone and we were talking about how we speak of certain people as “riding the fence.” They really aren’t riding the fence. If they’re not clearly grounded and settled in this truth of Christ and him crucified, then they’re not of him. There is no middle ground. Those are terms that men like to come up with to give credit to individuals that are lost and yet they somehow want to find some middle ground for

them. Here, Joshua put it very plainly. He didn't say "if you will put away the gods which your fathers served on the other side of the flood and in Egypt" he said "put them away; have nothing to do with them." There is a clear line of distinction drawn between the God of Scripture, the God of truth, and all others.

Look here in 1 Thessalonians how Paul describes a true work of God. In verse 7, he says, "So that ye were ensamples to all that believe in Macedonia and Achaia." The word "ensamples" means "a pattern" so if you want to know a pattern of what it is to believe, here it is. "For from you sounded out," notice: "the word of the Lord." There is one distinct word that gives him all the glory, that's declared in the gospels of his Son. "Not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith to God-ward," it doesn't just say "faith," faith always has an object, "to God-ward." Faith is repentance toward God and resting in the Lord Jesus Christ, "is spread abroad; so that we need not to speak any thing." This faith speaks for itself, where God has revealed his Son and so on. "For they themselves shew of us what manner of entering in we had unto you," and here it is: "and how ye turned to God from idols." You cannot face two directions at the same time. You cannot be turned to God and looking to Christ alone and at the same time looking here. Now, some can pretend to be turned toward God like Lot's wife. Why does the Scripture say to remember Lot's wife? Because profession is not salvation. There was a time that she ran and accompanied Lot to a certain point but her heart was really still back here and when she turned, she was destroyed, she became a pillar of salt, is what the Scriptures say. "How ye turned to God," what? "From idols," there's the word, "to serve," to worship, "the living and true God. And to wait for his Son." That word "and" is the word "even." What is it to worship the living and true God? Well, it's "to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead." Even there you see Christ and him crucified. To be raised from the dead means a work accomplished. "Even Jesus, which delivered us from the wrath to come." How did he deliver us? Well, in his death, that cross work accomplished. So, that's a command. There is no compromise even there. It's Christ and Christ alone.

Then, in Joshua 24:14, the fourth command and you say, "Well, it's redundant." It says "and serve ye the Lord." I've often said that if something were mentioned just once in Scripture, it would suffice and there is nothing that is repeated in Scripture that is just filler, to be redundant. No. When it says here "serve ye the Lord" it means "serve him and him alone." That's the command of Scripture and we see that in Scripture. Look in Exodus 34:14. I didn't come to this persuasion through men's teachings or upbringing or self-searching or self-research. None of us would. Left to ourselves, we would be flat on our face in idolatry, but if I stand here and declare this to you, it's because of what the Lord, in his grace and mercy, has been pleased to do in this poor sinner's heart. And when it says to "serve the Lord," just like Joshua said, "whatever you do, do, you might as well do it with all your might. Serve the other gods, but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." Such is that singularity, that decidedness, that single eye toward the Savior that we find reflective of God's work of grace.

Here in Exodus 34:14, he commanded, "For thou shalt worship no other god." There really isn't any other God. It's a figment of men's imagination, that's what the word



“idolatry” is, idea. Men formulate an idea of how God is and they bow down to that God but you, you see what he says in verse 13, “ye shall destroy their altars, break their images, and cut down their groves.” Don’t have anything to do with it. Put away these other gods, “For thou shalt worship no other god: for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God.” Jealous for his glory, jealous for his honor, that he has placed nowhere else but in his Son.

And, certainly, that is repeated over here in Acts 4:12. I was speaking with Brother James over in Malawi this morning on Skype and saw he was online so I was talking with him and he went to a funeral that he was asked to preach for a child that had died. And I had forgotten how important funerals are particularly over in Africa. Everybody and their mother attends. There are no excuses. The whole village will empty and go from one village to another, that’s just how they do it. And I was startled when, I thought it was a typo, when he told me that he had preached to some 3,000 that were gathered for a funeral and I asked him, I said, “Well, what was your text?” And he said it was Acts 4:12 and I said, “Well, if the Lord directed you, that would be a good text to declare to that people.”

It says here, “Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.” I can’t state it any more clear than that. This is God’s inspired Word right here. When he says “neither is there salvation in any other,” there is no other redemption. That’s what that word “salvation” is because salvation requires a redemption, it requires a ransom. “There is no other ransom. There is ransom in none other.” Do you see that? If you think that it’s through any kind of works or legal righteousness or personal obedience to the law or exercise of your will or some moral or ceremonial fulfilling, you’re dead wrong. Dead wrong.

He is our redemption. When it says there “for there is none other name” that’s speaking of the Savior, that’s speaking of the substitute. There is no other Savior. There is no other substitute. There is no other sacrifice. No other thing. No other person. No matter how great it may seem in an individual’s eyes. There is none other. No other power. No other strength. No other supposed holiness of religion. All these supposed holiness movements be done away with. Put it away, it’s another god. And when he says “under heaven” that means throughout all the earth. There is one message. There is one Redeemer. There is one Savior. There is one Ransom. There is one message. You don’t change it from place to place. Paul had but one message to preach whether he was declaring it to his natural Jewish brother or whether he was declaring it to the Gentiles. One message: salvation by the grace of God. And is “given among men.” Notice, even those little words “given among men” it takes a grace to know God in truth and to believe in his Son and rest in him, “whereby we must be saved.”

There is one salvation and God has resolved in his purpose and decree from eternity, that that salvation be upon his chosen people, ones that he has purposed to save and he appointed his Son to be that salvation for them and, I trust we can say, for us if he has so been gracious to our own hearts. But by no other, in no other way, no other means. People say, “Well, I don’t like the way you set that forth.” It doesn’t matter. It’s what this

Word says. “Whereby,” it says there, “we must be saved.” In other words, unless by him alone.

Those are the gospel commands. Pretty clear, isn’t it? Think back to that herald coming out and declaring it, what it is. It is as the Lord has purposed it and given it.