

Joshua: Joshua's Farewell Speech

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Joshua is about 100 years old, but he's not too old to preach sermons. In fact, in the closing chapters of the book of Joshua he preaches three sermons. And Joshua is dying as he lived. The concerns that have been Joshua's burden all of his life are still the same concerns and burdens with which he departs from this life. There is something enormously striking about that, isn't there.

Before we begin to look at the details of the chapter, there's something extraordinarily wonderful about Joshua as an old man, a man of 100 years. Who is concerned for the future of the people of God. He may be going the way of all flesh, but he's not concerned about himself. But he is concerned about the kingdom and he's concerned about the church and he's concerned about the people of God and he's concerned about the future. You know, that's a characteristic of men and women who are godly when they grow old: that they are still concerned about the future. A future they may never see. A future they may never partake in, but the future of their children and the future of their grandchildren and the future of generations to come. I find that enormously encouraging as we begin this chapter, that Joshua has a long-term view of things. Joshua is looking down the corridors of history, he's looking down the generations to come, and he's concerned about their spiritual well being. Experienced believers are able to see what is required for the long haul, and what Joshua has to say here is not of the quick-fix mentality. No, Joshua has in view here the long haul, what it takes to be a mature believer in the lord Jesus Christ for generations to come. And there are lessons to be learned in this chapter that are transferable to every age, including our own.

And so I want to ask the question, "What is it that lies on Joshua's heart?" Imagine that you are going to visit Joshua, 100 years old and you're going to hear his final words, his closing thoughts, his motives and ambitions, and what are they? What are the great concerns of Joshua, the captain of the lord's army that has led the people of God into the Promised Land. We've seen him in battle and now we see him as the land has been divided and the various tribes are about to go their various ways, and Joshua has one final parting word for them.

It's probably difficult for us to catch something of the occasion of chapter 23, the historic occasion. For years to come, for generations to come, indeed, we're still

doing it today, people will be talking about this. "Do you remember what Joshua said to us before he died? Do you remember his words?" There's a very solemn moment in my own personal life. I was about five years old, and my grandfather was dying. He had been ill for many years, and was dying of cancer. We were all ushered into his bedroom just a few days before he died, and he gave each one of his grandchildren a very personal and particular gift. Mine was a fountain pen. And he had some very solemn words to give to me, I think about them often. In fact, as I get older, I think about them more than I did when I was younger. And the sense of occasion comes back to me. I didn't appreciate it when I was five years old, but now as I look back, I think of the solemnity of that particular occasion. And that's the kind of occasion that we have here. Joshua is about to go the way of all flesh, and he's got some final words for you to hear. Now what are they? There are three basic principles that I want us to see, the first of which is, how God's grace works.

1. How God's grace works

Several times in the course of this chapter, Joshua reminds the people that it is by God's power, by God's sovereignty, by God's doing that they have occupied this land. It is only because God has broken through into the situation that they have been enabled to occupy this land of Canaan. Whatever land they have occupied, whatever battles they have won, whatever cities had been destroyed, however far north, west, south and even across the Jordan for the two and a half tribes, whatever they have possessed, they have possessed it by the sovereign hand of Almighty God. It is He who has done it in the past and it is He who will continue to enable them to possess their lands.

It is a story of redemption. The land of Canaan had fallen into the powers of darkness, and the invasion of it was a divine reclaiming of it for His people and for His purposes. Don't you get the impression that that is what Joshua wants them to remember? He wants them to remember that it is not by might, it is not by power, but by God's Spirit. "The Lord your God, it is He who has been fighting for you." I want you to remember that. I don't want you to be taken up with any sense of pride or arrogance in the establishment of the land of Canaan by you saying that it is by your accomplishment or your doing. It is by God's doing, and it is by God's power, and it is by the putting forth of God's Spirit.

But notice exactly what it is that Joshua says. For example, in verse 3, "You have seen all that the Lord your God has done to all these nations because of you. For the Lord your God is He who has been fighting for you."

And again in verse 5, "The Lord your God, He will thrust them out before you and you shall possess the land." There is that which God does, the putting forth of the power and the sovereignty of God. And there is also on the part of the people that which they do. Nothing can withstand His power. It's a wonderful illustration

of a principle: that when the Scriptures affirm that it is God who saves, it never encourages us to draw the conclusion that we can sit down and do nothing. No. God will push them out, but you will take possession of the land. Verse 5: He will push them out and you will take possession of the land.

It's a basic principle of how God establishes His kingdom, by producing obedience in the lives of His kingdom people. That's the way He saves. He saves by the putting forth of His power, that enables us to work. He does it, but He does it in and through His people. It's a principle that operates under the New Covenant. "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling," Paul says, "for it is God that works in you, both to will and to do of His good pleasure." And it's important for us to understand that principle, and Joshua was concerned that the people of God understand that principle. God saves us, and when God rescues us from our plight, He doesn't save over the top of our heads, but He saves in and through us, working in us to enable also to take possession of the land.

Do you hear what Joshua is saying? If in my life I am not yielding more and more to the lordship of Christ, then there is no evidence that the Lord has been working savingly in my life, because the evidence of the true work of God in my life is that I am now engaged in the possessing of the land, in the possessing of the kingdom of God. God is working, but He is working in and through us, His people.

There is a story that is often told, and I'm not sure if it is true. But it's one of those stories that ought to be true even if it isn't. Billy Graham, on a plane was accosted by a man who was evidently drunk and said to Dr Graham, "I am one of your converts." "You must be," Graham replied, "because you show no evidence that you are one of the Lord's converts." When God works, He works in us, He works through us. He will push out the Canaanites, but you must possess the land. And there is this wonderful balance of the work of God and of our work, because of what he has done in the establishment of the kingdom. It's a principle that operates. That's the way grace works. But there's a second thing that Joshua wants us to see, and that is

2. How spiritual obedience works

He gives to the people a series of commands or imperatives, for example in verse 6: "Be very firm then to keep and do all that is written in the book of the law of Moses so that you may not turn aside from it to the right hand or to the left." He says again in verse 11: "So take diligent heed to yourselves to love the Lord your God" and then very specifically in verse 12, "If you ever go back and cling to the rest of these nations, those which remain among you, and intermarry with them so that you associate with them and they with you," and so on. They are to separate from the gods and the practices of the nations that they are now occupying."

There are two things that Joshua is saying to the people of God. The first is a very simple thing; that obedience always and invariably involves a positive and a negative, a positive and a negative. There are things that they must do and there are things that they must avoid doing. There are positive things and there are negative things. It's a principle that operates in the New Covenant. It's a principle that operates in the entirety of Scripture, isn't it? When Paul writes his letters and he makes his moral and ethical applications, sometimes there are positives and sometimes there are negatives. There is a putting on and there is a putting off. There is putting sin to death, and there is putting on the graces of the Spirit and the fruits of the Spirit. There is mortification and there is vivification. There is a negative and a positive. There is a no and a yes. You remember the text from Romans 13 that was instrumental in the conversion of Augustine, "Put on Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh." Put on and make no provision. There is a positive and there is a negative, and this is what Joshua is doing in this 23rd chapter. There are things that you must do. You must be very firm, you must keep all the commandments, but there are things that you must avoid doing. In particular, you must avoid intermarriage amongst the heathen nations that you are now occupying. That's the first thing.

There is always a negative and a positive. You cannot live kingdom life with only positive thoughts. You know, people who say, "Let's be positive." I understand that, I am terribly sympathetic with that, but it is not always possible to be positive. There are times when you have to be negative. There are times when you have to say "No." But you cannot live kingdom life in purely negative terms either. There must be this balance between the positive and the negative. That's the first thing.

The second thing is this, and we post moderns, I suppose, will find this extraordinarily difficult, but we must be careful, Joshua says, "You must be careful to observe everything that the Lord your God has taught you in His word." Look at what he says, for example, in verse 6, "Be firm, be very firm then, to keep and to do all that is written in the book of the law of Moses, so that you may not turn aside from it to the right hand or to the left hand." Be very careful to do all that God commands. Wouldn't it be more comfortable if Joshua had said something like, "Now relax, take it easy, put your feet up, don't become too precise or legalistic." And what does Joshua say? "You need to be careful to observe everything, everything that God has written. He wants meticulousness. He wants precision.

You know, that's what the Puritans wished to be called, before they were first called Puritans; before that they were called Precisionists. There was one particular Puritan, born about 1550 or so, Richard Rogers, and he was accused of being too precise. And he said, "But I serve a precise God."

Do you know what happens, young people, when a young man falls in love?

Girls, do you know what happens when a young man falls in love? He becomes precise. He becomes concerned about little details of personal hygiene. You will find the most robust young man smelling like a flower, because he has fallen in love, and he is concerned about what his loved one now thinks of him. You will find young men spending hours before a mirror in the bathroom, preparing themselves, all because they want to impress a young girl. The whole thing is summarized for us in verse 8, "Hold fast" or "Cling to the Lord your God" or as the King James Version that some of you are still reading has it, "cleave." Isn't that a great word, "Cleave to the Lord your God." As you have done to this day.

You know, it's a word that is almost certainly taken out of the book of Genesis and those opening chapters, leaving and cleaving. What does that remind you of? It reminds you of marriage. That you leave the oversight and the covenantal responsibilities of your parents and now you cleave to your intended spouse. It's exactly what Jesus says to the disciples when He calls them, "Follow Me and I will make you fishers of men. And they forsook all and followed Him." It's at the heart of the book of Proverbs, isn't it? Trust in the Lord with all of your heart and lean not to thy own understanding, in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your path." We're to give everything to God. We're to give absolutely everything to God. We love Him, and Joshua says to be careful that you love the Lord your God. But we cannot have enough of Him, we cannot have enough of His presence, we cannot have enough of His blessing, and we cannot have enough of His words.

You know this word, cleave or cling, it's the word that's used in 2 Samuel 23, and it's used of one of David's mighty men of valor, Eliezer. And he's fighting the Philistines, and he's been on that battlefield all day with his sword, and he's been parrying and thrusting and cutting without a rest, fighting for the whole day. And we're told that when the day came to a close and the victory had been won and the slain were lying on the ground, the sword was stuck to his hand. And I imagine that blisters had formed and skin had come off his hand and blood had congealed and his hand was stuck to the sword. And the story went around that he had tried to let go of the sword but the sword wouldn't let go of him. Cleave to the Lord like that, so that you are so stuck to Him that even if you wanted to, you couldn't do it. Can you imagine a grip of that kind? Your fist has been so clinched all day long in battle that at the end of the day you can't let go of that sword. It won't let go of you. Cleave to the Lord your God, because that's the way spiritual obedience works.

You know, people ask the question, and maybe you've asked it, "Do I have to observe 'fill in the blank'?" It can be anything. Put in your favorite answer. Under the new covenant, do I now have to do 'whatever'? Why are you asking the question? Is there not in your heart a desire, ask yourself, "Is there a desire to cleave to the Lord your God with all your hearts and to be careful to do everything, everything, that God has written down in His word?" Oh, that's the kind of people we ought to be, searching the Scriptures, underlining all those

things that bring our heavenly Father such wonderful pleasure. And in the doing of that obedience, we ourselves find the greatest pleasure.

But there is third thing we must see, and that is the way God's covenant works.

3. The way God's covenant works.

He says, in verse 14 and 15, that he's about to go the way of all the earth, that is to say, he's about to die, and he says something positive and something negative. Do you see that? There's something wonderfully positive here and it is this: verse 14, every promise has been fulfilled and not one of them has failed. Can you disprove this for me? Can you do that? Run your finger over 14 as if it were Braille. Not a single promise of the Lord has failed, not one, and you are not the exception. Child of God, you're not the exception. God has fulfilled every promise to every single child of God except you. No. You're not the exception. Every promise that God has ever made, or ever will make, will be fulfilled. Isn't that extraordinary. Isn't that something you just want to get a hold of and wrap around you and take it home? It's like finding treasure.

I was on a walk once, in a park in Belfast, where I used to go sometimes to relax. And as I was walking on the ground, I saw a 20-pound note. That's roughly 30 dollars. And I walked a little further, and lo and behold, there was another one. And a little further, and lo and behold, there was another one. And another, until I had four of them. You know the thought, you pick them up and look to see who's looking, and you want to put them in your pocket. I didn't, I took them to the police. Actually I did get them, because after six months no one had claimed them. But I had told this story so many times that there was no way I could keep it, so I had to give it to the church. But the point is, finding treasure. Here is a word of enormous treasure, "Not one promise of God will ever fail."

Do you see, my friends, and we must see it, because there's a negative here. It's not just positive, you see. There's a negative. Verse 16, what if you break the covenant of the Lord? What if you go back on your promise? What then? Do you see what he's saying? God will always keep His word, and God's word is both positive and negative. And God has said that if you put your faith in Jesus Christ and you trust Him and Him alone for your salvation, He will never, never, never abandon you, He will never forsake you.

But what if you do not? Or what if you put your trust in Jesus for a period of time, but it was all of you and you go back on it and you're one of those converts like Billy Graham found on that airplane, and you're one of Billy Graham's converts, and not one of the Lord's converts, what then? And that promise, too, that threat, too, will come true, because God will keep His promise. He did keep His promises, and He did keep His threats, because the people of God did abandon the covenant and they found themselves found themselves out of the land of

Canaan and found themselves in Babylon.

So what hope do we have tonight? What hope do we have? Our only hope this evening lies in One who has obeyed every precept and every facet of God's law, and He's obeyed it on our behalf and met all the covenant demands, even our Savior, Jesus Christ, who died for us, who gave Himself for us, who was cut off from the land of the living for us, in order that you and I by trusting in Jesus might occupy that land that God has promised for us. That those in a far country, cast out of the good land, might have someone in whom they may trust.

Oh, my friends, right at the very heart of Joshua 23, is the gospel, and the promise of God's Son, and the way of salvation by faith alone in the promise of God alone, that is to be found in trusting in Jesus. Because if you're not trusting in Jesus, then the threat of being cast out forever will also come true. So trust Him. Trust Him with all of your hearts, and never let Him go.

Let's pray together.

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