

Preparing the Next Generation

Joshua 23

Introduction

We now enter a new section of Joshua, containing Joshua's final address to a nation he had served his entire life. Some have called this Joshua's last will and testament.³⁴ While there are remarkable similarities between the two, Chapter 23 looks ahead to God's actions in the future, while Chapter 24 looks back at what God had done for them. These addresses were thought to be conducted separately, with the first being in Shiloh and the second being held at Shechem, 24.1. Chronologically, the events here may not be much later than those of chapter 13. Joshua is now old and *advanced in age* 23.1. Finally, it appears that the address of chapter 23 is given to a smaller audience (primarily the leadership of the nation), whereas chapter 24 is addressed to the country at large.

Inside Joshua 23, we find three charges to be faithful.

Joshua 23.2-8: A Call to Faithfulness

Joshua was now over 100 years old. (He died at the age of 110, 24.29.) He begins by stressing the faithfulness of the Lord and how He fought on their behalf. As Israel approached the land of Canaan, it was repeatedly promised that God would fight for them³⁵. This had all come to pass as the land had become theirs. God had *destroyed* the Canaanites from the Jordan to the Mediterranean. For those enemies who did remain, their days were numbered. *The Lord your God will force them back on your account and drive them out before you so that you can take possession of their land, 24.5.*

24.6-8: Steadfastness Required

Israel's ownership of the land, both what they have now and what they will receive in the future, depended on their obedience to the covenant. This does not contradict the idea of God's generous gift, which is emphasized throughout the book. But their loyalty and obedience were still a requirement.

This would be accomplished by following and doing everything written in the book of the Law of Moses, see 1.7. The law was God's way of providing a close relationship between him and his people. Here, they are once again told to do what they were at the start of the book; that is, they are not to turn away from the law to the right or the left, 1.7. Seeing the other nations as enemies of Israel (v. 1), Joshua's final speech urges them to keep away from them. Specifically, Joshua was referring to the Mosaic commands regarding absolute separation between the people of God and the peoples remaining in the land. Israel was to form its own identity as God's people. The strong lure of fertility worship, with practices that dishonored the Lord's worshippers, had to be avoided at all costs. That is why any sign of following the Canaanites' religion is forbidden.

Four external forms of worship are mentioned in verse 7. Similar commands can be found in Exodus 20.24, 23.13, Deuteronomy 6.13, 10.20, and 12.3. These negative commands could easily lead to a legalistic attitude, which does not involve the heart. However, passages like Psalm 16 show that the faithful Israelites knew how to balance the negative and positive aspects of loving and fearing God. In these verses, Joshua chose to focus on the positive. Other than a few lapses, this generation had maintained their loyalty to God. They were urged to continue in that.

23.9-13: Another Call to Obedience

Israel had every reason to stay loyal to God based on what they had seen Him do. They had already been instructed to love the Lord in Deuteronomy 6.5, 10.12, and 11.13. Love for God is exclusive and involves intentional and engaged devotion to Him. He had defeated powerful nations in front of them. No one could resist their armies. He had fought for them so that one of them could chase away a thousand enemies³⁶. He had fulfilled his promise wonderfully, 23.8-10.

Israel should not think that God would always help them like this. His help depended on their obedience. They had to keep loving Him and only Him. In Canaan, they would face the temptation to turn away from him and join the other nations. Apostasy is always in the realm of possibility. They would be tempted to show the same devotion to the idols they should have demonstrated to the Lord. Marrying the foreigners was one way of doing that. If they did this, God would leave them. He would stop driving out the nations from before them. Those pagan nations would become a trap and a danger. They would make Israel suffer, like a whip on the back or thorns in the eye. Ultimately, they would lose the good land that God had given them, 23.11-13.

23.14-16: A Third Exhortation to Faithfulness

As Joshua nears the end of his life, he gives his final words to the people. He tells them that he will soon die, just like everyone else. He wants them to remember how God has kept all his promises to them. Not one word of promise had failed. They should love God with all their heart and soul and think about his wonderful deeds for them. Joshua repeats some of his main points several times to ensure people understand and remember them.

The same God who kept his positive promises to Israel would also keep his threats. Joshua tells the people that if they break God's covenant, they will lose the blessings that God has given them. The word "covenant" is not often used in Joshua but is very important. It means the agreement between God and his people based on grace and law. The law tells the people how to live and be forgiven when they sin. But they must not disobey the law or worship other gods. If they chose to turn away from God, he would punish them by taking away the land or sending enemies to attack them. These final words of Joshua are a good summary of the whole book. They show us what the book is about and what it wants us to learn. They also match the beginning of the book, where God tells Joshua how to lead the people into the land.

What's In This For Us?

Faithfulness to God's Promises: Just as Joshua emphasized God's faithfulness in fulfilling His promises to Israel, we can reflect on God's faithfulness in their lives. Trusting God's promises is essential even when facing challenges or uncertainties. Reflect on instances in your life where God has been faithful to His promises, and let that strengthen your faith and trust in Him during difficult times.

Steadfast Obedience: Just as Israel's possession of the land depended on their obedience to God's covenant, we must be reminded of the importance of steadfast obedience to God's commands. While God's grace is freely given, obedience is still required to demonstrate love and loyalty. Evaluate areas where you may compromise obedience to God's commands and strive for greater alignment with His will.

Exclusive Devotion: Israel was warned against turning away from God and idolatry, emphasizing the need for exclusive devotion to Him. In today's world filled with distractions and competing priorities, Christians are challenged to prioritize their relationship with God above all else. Take inventory of your priorities and commitments, ensuring God is foremost in your life and decisions.

Remembering God's Faithfulness: Just as Joshua urged the people to remember God's faithfulness in fulfilling His promises, we are encouraged to recall God's faithfulness in their lives. Remembering God's past faithfulness can provide strength and encouragement in times of doubt or difficulty. Cultivate a habit of gratitude by regularly reflecting on and thanking God for His faithfulness in your past and present life.

Consequences of Disobedience: Joshua's warning about the consequences of disobedience serves as a sober reminder for modern audiences. While God is gracious and merciful, there are still consequences for willful disobedience. Take seriously the warnings against disobedience in Scripture and strive to align with God's will, recognizing the seriousness of sin and its potential consequences. Seek forgiveness and restoration through genuine repentance when needed.

Conclusion

Joshua's final address to Israel serves as a reminder of God's faithfulness, the importance of obedience, and the consequences of disobedience. As we reflect on these teachings, Christians are challenged to apply them to our lives.

Just as Israel was called to remain faithful to God's covenant, we are called to steadfast obedience and exclusive devotion to Him in a world filled with distractions and temptations. We must remember God's faithfulness in our lives, drawing strength from His past acts of deliverance and provision.

At the same time, we must heed the warnings against disobedience, recognizing the severe consequences that can result. Let us commit ourselves to a life of faithfulness, obedience, and remembrance of God's goodness, trusting that He who has been faithful in the past will continue to be faithful.

May we be inspired by Joshua's example to live wholeheartedly for God, keeping His commands and trusting in His promises, knowing that in doing so, we will experience the fullness of His blessings and the joy of His presence both now and for eternity.

Thought Questions for Discussion

1. Reflecting on Joshua's call to faithfulness, what challenges do modern believers face in remaining steadfast in their commitment to God?
2. In what ways do you see God's faithfulness demonstrated in your own life or the lives of others around you? How does this inspire your faith?
3. Considering the consequences of disobedience outlined in Joshua's address, how can we maintain a healthy fear of God while understanding His grace and mercy?
4. Joshua warned against the lure of idolatry and compromise with the surrounding cultures. What modern-day "idols" or temptations can distract us from wholehearted devotion to God?
5. How can we practically prioritize our relationship with God above all other commitments and distractions in today's busy world?
6. Joshua emphasized the importance of remembering God's faithfulness. What practices or habits can we cultivate to help us recognize and give thanks for God's past acts of provision and deliverance in our lives?
7. Discuss the balance between God's sovereignty and human responsibility concerning obedience and faithfulness. How do we navigate this tension in our daily lives?
8. What practical steps can we take to guard against the influences of a culture that may lead us away from God's commands and values?
9. How do we discern between cultural practices or norms compatible with our faith and those contrary to it?

10. Considering Joshua's charge to love God with all our heart and soul, what does this look like practically in our relationships, choices, and priorities? How can we cultivate a more profound love for God in our lives?

³⁴ Woudstra, p. 333.

³⁵ Deuteronomy 1.30; 3.22; 20.4; Exodus 14.14.

³⁶ This actually happened in the case of Samson, Judges 15.15-16.