

Joshua 23 – “God’s Faithfulness and Our Obedience”

A man came home from work and found his three children outside, still in their pajamas, playing in the mud, with empty food boxes and wrappers strewn all around the front yard. The door of his wife's car was open, as was the front door to the house and there was no sign of the dog.

Proceeding into the entry, he found an even bigger mess. A lamp had been knocked over, and the throw rug was wadded against one wall. In the front room the TV was loudly blaring a cartoon channel, and the family room was strewn with toys and various items of clothing. In the kitchen, dishes filled the sink, breakfast food was spilled on the counter, the fridge door was open wide, dog food was spilled on the floor, a broken glass lay under the table, and a small pile of sand was spread by the back door.

He quickly headed up the stairs, stepping over toys and more piles of clothes, looking for his wife. He was worried she might be ill, or that something serious had happened. He was met with a small trickle of water as it made its way out the bathroom door. As he peered inside he found wet towels, scummy soap and more toys strewn over the floor. Miles of toilet paper lay in a heap and toothpaste had been smeared over the mirror and walls.

As he rushed to the bedroom, he found his wife still curled up in the bed in her pajamas, reading a novel. She looked up at him, smiled, and asked how his day went. He looked at her bewildered and asked, ‘What happened here today?’ She again smiled and answered, "You know every day when you come home from work and you ask me what in the world I do all day?"

"Yes," was his incredulous reply.

She answered, "Well, today I didn't do it."

Today we’re going to see that Joshua is near the end of his life. He’s giving his farewell speech of sorts. And we see that Joshua has been faithful to lead well. He hasn’t left a mess, things are in order. And as he wraps things up he reminds the people of God’s goodness but also of their responsibilities.

1. What The Lord Has Done – 23:1-5

23:1-2 - *Now it came to pass, a long time after the Lord had given rest to Israel from all their enemies round about, that Joshua was old, advanced in age. ² And Joshua called for all Israel, for their elders, for their heads, for*

their judges, and for their officers, and said to them: “I am old, advanced in age.

Joshua is an old man at this point, perhaps 110 years or more. But we see this man continuing to lead, encourage, and teach. He’s going out with a bang.

- This is the way it should be for the one who is serving God. We may feel tired and rickety and think we’ve done all that we can do, but like Joshua and Caleb, as we live surrendered and available to God, He will continue to use us in our golden years until He calls us home to the golden streets of Heaven. That’s an exciting way to live life.
- **Isaiah 40:31**, *"But those who wait on the Lord Shall renew their strength; They shall mount up with wings like eagles, They shall run and not be weary, They shall walk and not faint."* (I have not seen an age limit on this verse anywhere yet).

23:3 - 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 fought for you.

Joshua could have given a recap of his exploits and gone into detail of all the great things he has accomplished, but he knows it was the Lord. And Joshua knows He deserves all the credit and all the glory.

It’s God who has done all these things to these nations. But notice why He has done them as well. Joshua said it’s ***because of you!*** That’s pretty huge.

God has called Israel, established Israel as a nation, and He’s done these things to preserve Israel and fulfill His promises to her.

- Is God doing this because Israel is so special? Is Israel more deserving than other nations? No, but God selected a nation to show Himself strong to and through. It’s a nation by which God demonstrates His grace and love.
- **Deuteronomy 7:6–9**, *“For you are a holy people to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for Himself, a special treasure above all the peoples on the face of the earth. ⁷ The Lord did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any other people, for you were the least of all peoples; ⁸ but because the Lord loves you, and because He would keep the oath which He swore to your fathers, the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of bondage, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. ⁹ “Therefore know that the Lord your God, He is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and mercy for a thousand generations with those who love Him and keep His commandments;”*

- God is upholding His Word, revealing His faithfulness. It's not that this nation was so special that God couldn't help but be loyal to them. It's that God's character is on the line. If God abandoned or rejected Israel, then other nations would claim that God wasn't able to do what He said He would.
- I say that to say, we are in the same boat. We're not saved because we're so special or deserving. We're saved because God says whoever calls upon Him will be saved. He does the saving. And He will continue to keep us and protect us as we look to Him in faith.

Joshua says ***the Lord your God is He who has fought for you***. Again, Israel cannot look to themselves as though their success was because of them. God has been on their side. God is fighting for them.

- We need to have that same perspective. We're not the ones that bring victory or success in our lives. God is the one who is doing the work. He's fighting for us. Does that mean we can sit back and do nothing. Absolutely not! God wants us to be active, but He wants us to be trusting Him and knowing that when the battles seem too great for us, God is at work. This is how our faith grows and increases.
- The people were told this is the way it would be. But they needed to step out into the battles to see how God would fight for them. **Deuteronomy 20:4**, *"for the LORD your God is He who goes with you, to fight for you against your enemies, to save you."*
- **Psalm 44:1–3**, *"We have heard with our ears, O God, Our fathers have told us, The deeds You did in their days, In days of old: ² You drove out the nations with Your hand, But them You planted; You afflicted the peoples, and cast them out. ³ For they did not gain possession of the land by their own sword, Nor did their own arm save them; But it was Your right hand, Your arm, and the light of Your countenance, Because You favored them."*

And because of the fact that we who have put our faith in Jesus are now children of God, we get to see the Lord do great things on our behalf.

- **1 Corinthians 15:57**, *"But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."*
- Again, this is not because we are so good and deserving, but because our God is so good and gracious towards us.
- **2 Chronicles 16:9**, *"For the eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to show Himself strong on behalf of those whose heart is loyal to Him."*

- Isn't it wonderful to know that it's God who fights for us?

23:4-5 - *See, I have divided to you by lot these nations that remain, to be an inheritance for your tribes, from the Jordan, with all the nations that I have cut off, as far as the Great Sea westward. ⁵ And the Lord your God will expel them from before you and drive them out of your sight. So you shall possess their land, as the Lord your God promised you.*

Joshua, like any good leader, has been diligent to have things in place. He's divided up the land as an inheritance for each of the tribes. He's covered a lot of ground – from east of the Jordan where they entered in, all the way to the Mediterranean Sea (***the Great Sea***).

But this is not a time to sit back and relax. There's still work to be done. They still need to go in and possess the land. The Lord will drive out the inhabitants, but the people still needed to take action to receive God's blessings!

- It's the same for us, God does His part, but there's a part of action that we must take. Don't think of this as the old unbiblical adage of: "God helps those who help themselves", that's not what we're saying here.
- It's the way of salvation. God does all the work to save us, but we need to respond and receive it.
- The people of Israel need to go in and receive the land they're being given. God will be faithful to do it, but Israel must be obedient to receive it.

2. What Israel Must Do – 23:6-8

23:6-8 - *Therefore be very courageous to keep and to do all that is written in the Book of the Law of Moses, lest you turn aside from it to the right hand or to the left, ⁷ and lest you go among these nations, these who remain among you. You shall not make mention of the name of their gods, nor cause anyone to swear by them; you shall not serve them nor bow down to them, ⁸ but you shall hold fast to the Lord your God, as you have done to this day.*

The key to Israel's success and prosperity was in keeping and doing (living out) the Word of God. It's interesting that Joshua says to ***be very courageous to keep and do all that is written***... Why do they need to be courageous? Isn't God's word good? Absolutely it is. But there are things in it that don't always seem to be the right way in our eyes. Things we're called to do that don't seem like they're going to bring success or be profitable. But we're called not to worry about how it all works out, we're just called to live it out.

And when we do so in faith, God will work it all out.

Now many people are good at **knowing** the Word, but not everyone is good at **doing** the Word, in other words, living it out, putting it into practice.

Jesus spoke a lot about hearing and doing versus hearing and not doing.

Such was the case with the wise and foolish builders (Matthew 7:24-27).

- After speaking on the Parables of the Sower and the Lamp, Jesus said in **Luke 8:18**, "*Therefore take heed how you hear...*" What does He mean by that? Many were hearing but not truly comprehending and putting it to practice. **James 1:22** echoes this: "*But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.*"

Joshua knew that if they did not make God's Word the daily focus and compass for their life, they would drift. And when you drift you become shipwrecked.

This would happen if the Israelites began to look at the things around them and wonder if there was some sort of life or help to be found there. Israel will see other nations offering up sacrifice and worship to other gods. We know Israel fell prey to this sort of thing. God had this as the first commandment, '*You shall have no other gods before Me*' (Exodus 20:3).

- God knew the tendency of the human heart to lean towards reassurance or backup plans. You see, these other nations worshipped these gods for what they thought they could provide for them. Yahweh was to be the One to provide for Israel. But Israel lacked faith and tried to cover their bases by worshipping these other gods. In so doing they were essentially saying that God was not enough.
- And in following other gods they were bringing God's judgment down upon them. It wasn't that it was not helping them, it was hurting them.
- God wanted them to stay the straight and narrow; stay in line with the Word. This would be to their benefit and blessing.

So Joshua says to **hold fast to the Lord your God**. That idea of holding fast is the old King James word, *cleave*. To cleave means to be joined together, not to be separated. It's what husbands are to do with their wives.

- The Christian life is filled with ups and downs, challenges and adverse circumstances which may tempt people to jump ship. But our only remedy for these conditions is to hold fast to the Lord. Because only God is able to help and only God is faithful.

- **Hebrews 10:23**, *“Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful.”*
- Joshua has already shown the faithfulness of God in their journeys to this point. We too can attest to God’s faithfulness in our lives and it is the reason for us to continue on in Him.

So, follow the Word and flee the world. Don’t stray from the Word or you will stray off path and into trouble. Just as Israel was to be a distinct people, so are we to be distinct and separate from the world.

Joshua once more reminds the Israelites of what God has done for them and to relate the faithfulness of God in all they have experienced.

3. What The Lord Has Done – 23:9-10

23:9-10 - *For the Lord has driven out from before you great and strong nations; but as for you, no one has been able to stand against you to this day. ¹⁰ One man of you shall chase a thousand, for the Lord your God is He who fights for you, as He promised you.*

God has more than proven Himself. He is clearly the One that Israel needs to be loyal and devoted to. Though Israel faced some difficult opponents and cities in the Promised land, no one has been able to stand against them or resist them. God has had His way with every opposition.

With God on our side we’re never outnumbered!! One man will chase a thousand.

- The story of Gideon is a great illustration of that. He comes against the 135,000 Midianite army with his army of 32,000. They’re outnumbered around 4 to 1. Not looking good. Yet God says, *“The people who are with you are too many for Me to give the Midianites into their hands, lest Israel claim glory for itself against Me, saying, ‘My own hand has saved me’”* (**Judges 7:2**).

So God reduces the number of Gideon’s men to 10,000. Now it’s 14 to 1 odds. This is bad. But God says, there’s still too many of you! How many of you would be saying, *‘God, I don’t mean to be critical, but I think your math is off!’*

And God brings the number of Gideon’s men down to 300. Now it’s 450 to 1 odds. Everyone in the natural would be thinking they don’t stand a chance! But God doesn’t work through the natural. This is what we often miss. And

God brought a great victory for Gideon and his 300 man army. The Midianites were miraculously subdued.

- And here Joshua is reminding the people of Israel that God is able to have one of you chase down a thousand. And it's not because you're so intimidating, it's because God is fighting for you. This is what He's promised. Will you trust Him at His Word? We free ourselves from a lot of worry and anxiety when we trust Him. In the natural it seems like there's no way we'll be able to overcome, but God works in miraculous, supernatural ways.

But there's a caveat in all this...

4. What Israel Must Do – 23:11-16

23:11-13 - *Therefore take careful heed to yourselves, that you love the Lord your God. ¹² Or else, if indeed you do go back, and cling to the remnant of these nations—these that remain among you—and make marriages with them, and go in to them and they to you, ¹³ know for certain that the Lord your God will no longer drive out these nations from before you. But they shall be snares and traps to you, and scourges on your sides and thorns in your eyes, until you perish from this good land which the Lord your God has given you.*

The caveat is that Israel must cling to the Lord and not cling to these nations. That word **cling** is the same Hebrew word used for *hold fast* in vs 8. If they're going to cling to the Lord, then they need to take careful heed of themselves. This means to guard and protect. They are to guard their hearts and not be pulled away in devotion to another. They are to protect their love for the Lord.

This is a love that is not a demand, or a burden. It is not to be a laborious effort. This is to be a delight for Israel. God has showered His love upon Israel as we already saw in Deuteronomy 7:8. He has been with them and upheld His promises to them. They have been greatly blessed by the Lord loving them. It's our fitting response to such a benevolent God. And a life lived in loving devotion to God is a life that knows the great care and grace received from God.

And God lets them know that this love and devotion to Him is meant to protect them. If they choose to cling to other nations and intermarry with them, He has no obligation to continue to drive them out. This is not a threat but a warning. A

warning that these nations will ultimately drag them down and bring defeat. It's out of God's love for Israel that He tells them to stay loyal and loving to Him.

You remember the story of Balaam. He was hired by King Balak of the Moabites to curse Israel. Balak was worried with Israel coming and defeating them. But as much as Balaam wanted to, he was unable to curse Israel but rather spoke blessing upon them: **Numbers 24:8**, *“God brings him out of Egypt; He has strength like a wild ox; He shall consume the nations, his enemies; He shall break their bones And pierce them with his arrows.”*

Balaam shared 4 oracles or prophecies of blessing. Balak was none too happy about it. But then in Numbers 25:1 we suddenly hear that the people of Israel began to commit harlotry with the daughters of Moab. And there was a great fallout in the camp of Israel where many died in the plague.

But what we don't know until Numbers 31:16 is that Balaam, though he was unable to curse Israel, he gave counsel to Balak to have their women come to the Israelites. And it caused the Israelites to fall to temptation, intermarry and take part in their idolatry and bring upon themselves the anger of the Lord.

- The world may look alluring, but you're not missing anything. Gods' ways are always better. And we need to follow Him in loving devotion, not out of fear but out of gratitude for all He has done for us and all He is to us.

Joshua is warning the people that those things that may seem alluring and may look innocent will turn out to be a snare and a trap. This is evident from their own history, as we just saw in the story of Balaam. This is why God has them utterly destroy the inhabitants of the land. If not, they'll become a corrupting force.

- So too, sin will be that which will corrupt and be a scourge if we don't cut it away. The wages of sin is death, there's no room to play around with it. Don't believe the lie that you can handle it. Its purpose is to destroy.

“Joshua can foresee the day when toleration will become socialization - and socialization will become assimilation. The Hebrews will inter-marry the pagans around them, and be drawn into their idolatry. Joshua warns Israel that the little pockets of paganism they've allowed to remain will ultimately be their downfall.”¹

- This is why we're called to be holy. To be holy speaks of separation. I'm not talking take yourself out of the world. We're to be a witness. And we're to be in the world, just be sure the world is not getting into you.

¹ Adams, Sandy. *Joshua 20-24 sermon*.

23:14 - “Behold, this day I am going the way of all the earth. And you know in all your hearts and in all your souls that not one thing has failed of all the good things which the Lord your God spoke concerning you. All have come to pass for you; not one word of them has failed.

As Joshua is about to pass away (he died at 110 years of age – 24:29), he again reiterates the goodness and faithfulness of God. He reminds these leaders of Israel that God is a God of His Word. He upholds His promises. There’s not been a broken promise yet and there never will be. Everything He said has come to pass!

But there’s a flip side to this...

23:15-16 - Therefore it shall come to pass, that as all the good things have come upon you which the Lord your God promised you, so the Lord will bring upon you all harmful things, until He has destroyed you from this good land which the Lord your God has given you. ¹⁶ When you have transgressed the covenant of the Lord your God, which He commanded you, and have gone and served other gods, and bowed down to them, then the anger of the Lord will burn against you, and you shall perish quickly from the good land which He has given you.

Just as God is faithful to keep His Word of promise and blessing, so too He must keep His Word of correction when His people go astray. Just as God will be faithful to bless them in their obedience, He will also be faithful to remove His hand of blessing if they walked in disobedience.

Part of Israel’s covenant with God was the principle of blessing for obedience and cursing for disobedience (Leviticus 26; Deuteronomy 28).

We are however under a different covenant:

Hebrews 8:6–12, *“But now He has obtained a more excellent ministry, inasmuch as He is also Mediator of a better covenant, which was established on better promises. ⁷ For if that first covenant had been faultless, then no place would have been sought for a second. ⁸ Because finding fault with them, He says: “Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah—⁹ not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt; because they did not continue in My covenant, and I disregarded them, says the Lord. ¹⁰ For this is the covenant that I will make with*

the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put My laws in their mind and write them on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. ¹¹ None of them shall teach his neighbor, and none his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them. ¹² For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more.'"

“Believers can trust in the promises of God because of the trustworthiness of the God who fulfilled his greatest promise in sending Christ the Messiah...”²

Jesus is our Mediator, our Saviour, our Redeemer. We’ve been redeemed from the curse of the law (Galatians 3:10-14).

Just because we’re under a new covenant and freed from the curse, doesn’t mean we can just go and do what we want. Though we don’t experience the same fate as Israel did, we still experience the loving correction from a loving Father. We’re still held to a standard of obedience which in doing we’ll experience the peace and blessing of God.

- Charles Spurgeon said, “God will not allow His children to sin successfully.”³

May we not even try. Our motivation for holding fast to the Lord is not fear of retribution, it’s joy of blessing from a God who loves to bless!

² Smith, R., Jr. (2023). *Exalting Jesus in Joshua* (D. Platt, D. L. Akin, & T. Merida, Eds.; p. 232). Holman Reference.

³ Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *Be Strong* (p. 149). Victor Books.