

Joshua 23: Biblical Reading and Reflections

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 16 June 2020

Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 00] Joshua chapter 23 A long time afterward, when the Lord had given rest to Israel from all their surrounding enemies, and Joshua was old and well advanced in years, Joshua summoned all Israel, its elders and heads, its judges and officers, and said to them, I am now old and well advanced in years, and you have seen all that the Lord your God has done to all these nations for your sake, for it is the Lord your God who has fought for you.

Behold, I have allotted to you as an inheritance for your tribes those nations that remain, along with all the nations that I have already cut off, from the Jordan to the great sea in the west.

The Lord your God will push them back before you and drive them out of your sight, and you shall possess their land, just as the Lord your God promised you. Therefore be very strong to keep and to do all that is written in the book of the law of Moses, turning aside from it neither to the right hand nor to the left, that you may not mix with these nations remaining among you, or make mention of the names of their gods, or swear by them, or serve them, or bow down to them, but you shall cling to the Lord your God just as you have done to this day, for the Lord has driven out before you great and strong nations.

And as for you, no man has been able to stand before you to this day. One man of you puts to flight a thousand, since it is the Lord your God who fights for you, just as he has promised you.

Be very careful therefore to love the Lord your God, for if you turn back and cling to the remnant of these nations remaining among you, and make marriages with them, so that you associate with them and they with you, know for certain that the Lord your God will no longer drive out these nations before you, but they shall be a snare and a trap for you, a whip on your sides and thorns in your eyes, until you perish from off this good ground that the Lord your God has given you.

[1 : 46] And now, I am about to go the way of all the earth, and you know in your hearts and souls, all of you, that not one word has failed of all the good things that the Lord your God promised concerning you.

All have come to pass for you, not one of them has failed. But just as all the good things that the Lord your God promised concerning you have been fulfilled for you, so the Lord will bring upon you all the evil things, until he has destroyed you from off this good land that the Lord your God has given you, if you transgress the covenant of the Lord your God, which he commanded you, and go and serve other gods and bow down to them.

Then the anger of the Lord will be kindled against you, and you shall perish quickly from off the good land that he has given to you. Joshua chapter 23 contains the first of two farewell addresses from Joshua.

Much as Deuteronomy ended with farewell discourses from Moses, and Genesis with farewell discourses from Jacob, so Joshua ends with such discourses from Joshua. The speech recalls earlier speeches, while looking forward to the nation's future.

It is part of a covenant renewal that ends Joshua's ministry, much as the covenant renewal on the plains of Moab at the end of the book of Deuteronomy comes at the end of Moses' life.

[3 : 02] Joshua is about to die, and Israel is about to enter into a new stage of their history, much as in Moses' farewell discourse in Deuteronomy, Joshua foresees apostasy in the nation's future, and this speech is very redolent of Deuteronomy throughout.

Joshua summons all Israel, its elders and heads, its judges and its officers, and this reference to the various officials brings to mind the fact that Israel will soon undergo a change in its political formation.

If the movement from Moses to Joshua was a graduation to a maturer form of politics, this is a further graduation. Government is now going to be exercised far more from the people themselves,

and a plurality of officials, rather than by a single appointed minister of the Lord, a charismatic figure like Moses or Joshua, someone who stands over against the people.

The sort of government that follows this transition will be much more apparent as we enter into the book of Judges. This speech recalls the speech that introduced the apportioning of the land in Joshua chapter 13 verses 1 to 7, especially its introduction.

Now Joshua was old and advanced in years, and the Lord said to him, You are old and advanced in years, and there remains yet very much land to possess. It also recalls Joshua chapter 1, and the charge given to Joshua and the people before they entered into the land.

[4 : 25] Finally, it recalls the statements of chapter 21 verses 43 to 45, Thus the Lord gave to Israel all the land that he swore to give to their fathers, and they took possession of it, and they settled there.

And the Lord gave them rest on every side, just as he had sworn to their fathers. Not one of all their enemies had withstood them, for the Lord had given all their enemies into their hands.

Not one word of all the good promises that the Lord had made to the house of Israel had failed. All came to pass. Joshua's speech ties together the earlier speech of the Lord to Joshua in chapter 1, the summary statement of the narrator in chapter 21, and it looks forward to the future, with its challenges and uncertainties.

Joshua is about to die, and the people are settled in the land. Yet the challenge of completely taking over the land remains. As Jean Baruch has noted, the expression the Lord your God is repeated twelve times within this chapter.

They are called to be strong, to do the law of Moses. The challenge of faithfulness will always be the primary challenge for them. It is precisely as they pursue faithfulness that they will be equipped for the other challenges that they face.

[5 : 38] There are still Canaanite peoples in the land. The land has been conquered, but there are still Canaanites present. They may not be the same military force to threaten Israel, but they do threaten Israel in its faithfulness.

It would be very easy for these peoples to lead them astray. Israel is not instructed to exterminate these people. It is presumed that they will remain in the land. The challenge rather is to ensure that, if any assimilation occurs, it will be the Canaanites assimilating into Israel, rather than vice versa.

Daniel Hawke underlines the nature of Israel's responsibility at this point. It is primarily one of faithfulness to the law of Moses, and cleaving to the Lord. The Lord will deal with the remaining threats to them within the land.

One of the greatest dangers is that of merging with Canaanite peoples. This was a point that Moses belabored back in Deuteronomy chapter 7. The temptation for Israel would always be to make strategic alliances, to assimilate with the peoples of the land, adopting their customs and their ways. Deuteronomy chapter 11 verses 22 to 23 promised, For if you will be careful to do all this commandment that I command you to do, loving the Lord your God, walking in all his ways, and holding fast to him, then the Lord will drive out all these nations before you, and you will dispossess nations greater and mightier than you.

[7 : 02] Joshua presents a similar promise again in verse 5. As there, the crucial thing will be faithfulness to the Lord. If they fail at that point, everything else will fall apart.

Obedying the Lord will take strength and courage. It would be very easy for Israel to lose its nerve. Cleaving to the Lord requires separation from the other peoples and nations that surround them, and which still dwell in the land.

But such separation is a risky matter. To be a people dwelling alone, as Balaam described Israel, requires a great deal of courage, when prudent politics would seem to require religious syncretism, intermarriage, and treaties as the way to secure peace and security.

Loving the Lord, and holding fast to him, is going to be a matter of national survival for Israel. It is from this love of, and cleaving to the Lord, that everything else flows.

It is this that will set them apart, not something internal to the nation itself, but its covenant with the Lord. This is what they must hold on to over everything else. If they lose their nerve, and start to intermingle with the Canaanites, the Canaanites will become a snare to them.

[8 : 12] Their warning here is reminiscent of Numbers chapter 33 verse 55. But if you do not drive out the inhabitants of the land from before you, then those of them whom you let remain, shall be as barbs in your eyes, and thorns in your sides, and they shall trouble you in the land where you dwell.

The speech ends by emphasizing the certainty of the word of the Lord. All of the good things that the Lord had promised had come to pass.

However, the curse was no less certain than the blessing, and if and when the Israelites rejected the covenant, they would perish from the land, just as certainly as they had been blessed according to the word of the Lord for their faithfulness.

A question to consider. Can you think of further ways in which keeping the commandment of the Lord would have required courage and strength on Israel's part?