

Sermon outline and notes © Dr. Stephen Felker, Pastor
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Joshua 23:1-16 (read vv.1-11) “How to Stay True to the Lord”

Intro. In chapter 23 we see that Joshua was nearing the end of his life. What a wonderful life he had lived! His long life of 110 years (24:29) started in Egyptian bondage. He saw the ten plagues but witnessed God’s deliverance of his nation. He witnessed the parting of the Red Sea. He and Caleb were the only ones out of 12 spies that had enough faith to believe that God would give them the Promised Land, in spite of the great obstacles they faced. Then 40 years later, Joshua was chosen by God to lead His people to take the land. They had victory after amazing victory until they had gained a firm foothold in the land, and divided the land as an inheritance among the 12 tribes. One of the last events of his life was to gather Israel, especially the leaders, to give a farewell exhortation as he was nearing death. With the Apostle Paul, Joshua could sincerely say, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith” (2 Tim. 4:7).

At the end of such a long and full life, Joshua’s greatest concern wasn’t for himself. His greatest concern was his people and their relationship to the Lord. He was concerned about what would happen to his nation after he died. Would they remain faithful to the Lord, or would they turn from the Lord and follow after other gods? After all, He knew that those of his generation were swiftly dying off. A new generation was coming along that did not see all the miracles and all the wonders of the Lord in their midst. There were young people who didn’t even see the walls of Jericho fall down before the armies of Israel. Would the new generation follow the Lord, like their parents and grandparents had done? Well, to keep the nation following the Lord after his death, in chapter 23 Joshua calls upon all the leaders of the nation to assemble before him¹ to give them a message before his death. He knew that the people tend to follow their leaders. If *they* would heed Joshua’s message, the people would likely follow.

Having assembled the leaders, Joshua presented them with two scenarios: Obey the Lord, and He will bless you, expand your territory and keep you in the land; or disobey Him, and He will judge you and remove you from the land. These were the terms of the covenant God had made with Israel at Mt. Sinai, which Moses had repeated on the Plains of Moab. Now, the challenge was for Israel to keep the covenant after Joshua passed on and avoid apostasy.

In some ways we are facing a similar situation. I believe that the last great move of God in our land was back in the 70’s. I experienced that in my own life. While there have been local revivals here and there, our young people and young adults have never been a part of a great revival in our land. Many of the founders of our church have passed on. Few remain after 43 years. I am now retiring after 34 years, and I will no longer be your pastor. Will you who remain stay true to the Lord? Will this church remain faithful to the Lord? Will our young people go off to college and abandon their faith? Over the years of my ministry I have witnessed no small number turn from their commitment to the Lord. It is so important that you remain faithful to the Lord. How can you do that? Well I want to share from our text five ways to stay true to the Lord. First of all:

¹ They either assembled at Shiloh, the location of the tabernacle, or they came to where he dwelt in Timnath-serah.

I. ALWAYS REMEMBER THE GOODNESS OF GOD

Yes, never forget what God has done for you and for our church. Joshua says in v.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.” He says something similar in v.9, “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.” Though some would attribute their victories to their great general, Joshua, He wanted them to remember what *God* had done in the past. The Lord had given them victory after victory, even against walled cities like Jericho, and armies that were superior in numbers, weapons, and even in the size of their warriors.

We also see the goodness of God in the fact that God had given them the land of Canaan. Three times in this brief address Joshua called Canaan “this good land” (vv. 13, 15-16). It had beautiful mountains and fertile valleys. It was a fruitful land. The argument is obvious: Since God has given us such a good land through many victories, the least we can do is be thankful, and live to please Him.

We need to reflect on the goodness of God of God today. He has been good in saving our souls, forgiving our sins, and giving us eternal life. He has been good to our church. We have grown numerically and spiritually. We have been blessed with nice facilities and are debt free. We have been blessed to live in a good land that we call America.

Why should you remember and reflect upon the goodness of God? It should cause you to be thankful to God. It is also a strong motivation for obedience and staying true to the Lord. Romans 2:4 says, “Or do you despise the riches of His goodness..., not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance?” One reason the prodigal son was brought to repentance was remembrance of his father’s goodness (Luke 15:17). The danger is that the material blessings from the Lord can so possess our hearts that we focus on the gifts and forget the Giver, and this leads to sin (Deut. 8).

When was the last time you reflected on the goodness of God? When did you give thanks to Him? That is so important if we are going to follow the Lord faithfully.

II. KEEP CLAIMING THE PROMISES OF GOD

God had promised to give the land as an inheritance for the nation of Israel. After all, it belonged to Him. Yet there were still parts of the land that had not been taken for an inheritance. There were still pockets of resistance to overcome. So based on the promise of God, Joshua said in vv.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. 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.”

The Philistines were still in the land off to the west, along the coast. There were some other people groups in the land as well. Some may question their ability to take their lands and execute the Lord’s judgment against them. So notice what Joshua says in v.10, “One man of you shall chase a thousand, for the LORD your God is He who fights for you, as He promised you.” This was an echo of what Moses had said in Deuteronomy 32:30. They were not to wait until they could amass a larger army than their enemy. They were to go forth to battle, claiming this promise of God. If they did so, they would continue to experience God’s work in their midst. Joshua makes four references to the promises of God in this speech.

In v.14 we see why we can trust in the promises of God. Joshua says, “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” (cf. Joshua 21:45). As long as we meet the conditions, if any, God will certainly keep His promises. That’s because God is faithful to keep His Word. He is truth, and He never lies.

This is a good reminder to God’s people today. As we read the Bible and see what God did in the past for those who trusted Him, it encourages us to trust Him today and face all our enemies with courage and confidence. We can’t live on past victories. If we are going to remain true to the Lord, we must *continue* to claim the promises of God, and experience new victories for the Lord. For example, we need to go forth and win souls for Christ, claiming the promise of Christ in the Great Commission that He will be with us (Mt. 28:20). We need to keep sending missionaries to the nations, and rescue souls from the darkness of Islam and pagan religion. Some of us need to go, and not just send others. There are still thousands of unreached people groups in our world today.

Some of God’s promises are unconditional, but some of them are conditional and depend on our obedience for their fulfillment. Therefore, we need to follow the next main requirement of our text:

III. HAVE THE COURAGE TO LIVE BY GOD’S WORD

The Word of God is our guide. It shows us God’s will. So Joshua says in v.6, “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.” The word translated “courageous” primarily carries the meaning of “be strong.” Joshua wants us to be strong, courageous, and committed when it comes to obeying God’s Word. He does not want us to become lax and complacent. It takes courage and strength to live by God’s Word, because there are so many forces at work against obedience to God’s Word. As we shall see, the world is against obedience to God and His Word. The devil is against obedience to God. And even your own sin nature is against obedience to God’s Word. It is easy to go with the flow of the world, but it takes strength to stand for God and obey His Word. This appeal of Joshua hearkens back to Joshua 1:8, where God said, “This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate in it day and night, that you may observe to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success.” The Word of God is the standard by which we are to live. It gives us moral absolutes to live by, which are rooted in the nature and character of God.

Joshua was a great example to his people in this regard. The secret of his success was his devotion to the Word of God (vv. 6, 14; see 1:7-9, 13-18; 8:30-35; 11:12, 15; 24:26-27). I think it is interesting that in v.10, Joshua quotes from Deuteronomy 32:30, which shows how well Joshua knew the Word of God (see also Lev. 26:8). He not only learned God’s Word, but he also obeyed God’s commandments and believed God’s promises, and God worked on His behalf. During his leadership the nation had generally kept the law of Moses.

Of course, in order to live by God’s Word, you must know God’s Word. We, too, must learn and even memorize God’s Word, but then we must also be doers of the Word.

Now I trust that our Search Committee is looking for a pastor who will preach and teach *God’s* Word. Your responsibility is to learn from him and obey God’s Word. Be doers of the Word and not hearers only. That will go a long way toward helping you to stay true to the Lord.

Something else we must do is:

IV. KEEP LOVING THE LORD

Joshua says in v.11, “Therefore take careful heed to yourselves, that you love the LORD your God.” This had been commanded in the law of Moses, such as in Deut. 6:5 (see also Deut. 10:12; 11:13). To love God is the greatest commandment, as stated by Jesus Himself (Matthew 22:37). So this is one of the most important things you can do to stay true to the Lord. In fact, Joshua says “take careful heed,” which more literally means to be on high alert, to be very watchful of any departure from loving the Lord like you should. Otherwise, you may let your love for the Lord slip.

This reminds me of what the Lord rebuked the Ephesian church for. In Rev. 2:4 He said, “Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love.” Can you look back on your life with the Lord, and remember a time when you loved God more than you do now? Have you slipped in your love for the Lord?

We see one expression of love in v.8, “but you shall hold fast to the LORD your God, as you have done to this day.” The word translated “hold fast” in v.8 is used in Genesis 2:24 to describe a husband’s relationship to his wife. A husband is to cling to his wife. Israel was “married” to Jehovah at Mt. Sinai (Jer. 2:1-3; Ezek. 16) and was expected to be a faithful spouse and cling to the Lord (Deut. 4:4; 10:20; 11:22; 13:4). This means that we are to maintain a very close relationship with the Lord.

Especially beginning with the youth camp before my senior year of high school, I made a commitment to God. For 47 years I have held fast to God, and have not departed from Him morally, are in worship and faithful service to Him during that whole time. I believe that I have set a visible example for you to follow. Hold fast to the Lord in love in the days ahead, no matter what others do.

Joshua encouraged them to love the Lord, and hold fast to Him, noting that future victories would depend upon their loyalty to the Lord. As he indicates in v.10, if they remained loyal to the Lord, He would fight for them. But if they turned from the Lord, v.13 indicates that Israel would fall to their enemies, and even be driven from the land the Lord had given them, which eventually happened.

This is not just an Old Testament principle. After rebuking the Ephesian church for losing their first love, Jesus warned in Rev. 2:5, “Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place — unless you repent.” Based on Rev. 1:20, the lampstand represents the church. Christ is saying He may remove the church. It will die. Don’t let that happen to our church! Keep holding fast to the Lord in love.

Are you holding fast to the Lord? Though others may backslide; though others may turn from the Lord, I challenge you to hold fast in your commitment to the Lord. Once a true believer takes up their cross, and follows Jesus, there is no turning back.

Finally, in order to stay true to the Lord, you need to:

V. PRACTICE BIBLICAL SEPARATION

Joshua warns of another spiritual danger that would cause Israel to turn from the Lord. He says in v.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.” I think it is important to note that the word translated “cling” in v.12 is the same word translated “hold fast” in v.8. What a contrast! Instead of clinging to the Lord, he warned that they may cling to the world instead! Back in v.7 he gave another warning, “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.” [See also see Ex. 23:13; 34:10-17; Deut. 7:2-4]. These were four aspects of worship which were not to be directed toward pagan gods.

Joshua warned them that their disobedience would be a gradual thing. First, they would associate with these nations in a familiar way as they engage in business and trade. Then they would start learning about and discussing their religious practices. The Jewish men would then start marrying women from these pagan nations, something that was expressly forbidden (Exodus 34:12-15; Deut. 7:3). Before long Israel would even worship the false gods of the enemy and the line of separation between God’s people and the world would be completely erased. So instead of leading the Gentile nations to believe in their God, Joshua warns of the danger that they would begin to worship the gods of other nations. Sadly, within one generation the book of Judges reveals that they failed to heed this warning and began to worship the gods of the nations among them (Judges 2:3ff). This very thing also led to Solomon’s downfall (1 Kings 11).

As New Testament believers, indwelt by the power of the Holy Spirit, it is certainly true that we are to associate with unbelievers at work, at school, and in our neighborhood. It is good for Christian to be involved in community activities, to build relationships and open doors for a gospel witness. We are to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. But we must draw the line of separation when it comes to embracing the beliefs and sinful practices of the world, or when relationships to unbelievers become so close that they begin to have a negative influence upon us spiritually. We *certainly* are not to participate in false religion, or follow after the gods of self, success, materialism, and so forth. This is not just an Old Testament teaching. Right after calling upon his readers to avoid idolatry, the apostle Paul applied the following Old Testament quotation to New Testament believers, “Therefore come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, And I will receive you” (2 Cor. 6:17).

All of us feel the pressures of the world around us, trying to force us to conform (Rom. 12:1-21; 1 John 2:15-17); and it takes courage to defy the crowd and stay true to the Lord (Josh. 23:7).

In the days ahead, I challenge the church not to become like the world in the latest fads, whether it be beliefs or practices. Don’t try to put a Christian face on worldly culture. Draw your beliefs and practices from the Word of God.

God gives a warning through Joshua, that if they do not remain separate from the pagan nations, notice what will happen. In v.13 he says, “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.” Joshua piles up vivid words like snares, traps, scourges, and thorns to impress the Jews with the suffering they would experience if they disobeyed the Lord. The final stroke of chastening would be Israel’s removal from their land to a land of exile. After all, if you want to live and worship like the Gentiles, then God says you will live with the Gentiles! What Joshua warned about did indeed occur many years later, especially when Judah was removed from the land during their Babylonian captivity (2 Kings 25).

So what are you going to do? Will you step back from some worldly associations, and worldly activities? Will you decide not to watch a TV program, or go see a movie, that has content that is contrary to your Christian faith? Do you think you can get close to the world, and not be hurt? 2 Timothy 4:10 says, “for Demas has forsaken me, having loved this present world.” Worldliness has caused many a Christian to turn away from the Lord. The approval of the world,

the material things of the world, the pleasures of the world all can draw the Christian away from the Lord. Will you fail to give heed to this warning?

On June 3, 2009 a 12-year-old Virginia boy died and another boy was critically injured after lightning struck as they were playing catch. The incident occurred on a ball field south of Fredericksburg as severe storms battered parts of Virginia, flooding roads and knocking out power. Umpires had halted the Little League baseball game because of the weather and ordered participants off the field. But one player and an 11-year-old teammate remained and were playing catch under parents' supervision. Then, it seemed out of nowhere, lightning struck and killed the 12 year-old boy. He was the only one who scored so far in the game, and I'm sure he didn't want to heed the warning to get off the field. Even his parents failed to give heed to the warning. Indeed, failing to give heed to warnings can be deadly. The generation that followed Joshua failed to give heed to his warning.

Conclusion: Where will you be 5 years from now spiritually? Will you still be loving Christ with all your heart? Will you still be active in church, serving the Lord? Or will you drop out of church, and spend your time pursuing the things of the world? Sadly, in over 40 years of ministry, I have seen quite a few join the church, but within a few years they quit worshipping and living for the Lord.

How can you remain faithful to the Lord, and not backslide? Do what Joshua says here in chapter 23. Reflect on the goodness of God. Keep claiming the promises of God, and see God continue His work in your life. In response to His goodness and faithfulness, be strong in your obedience to His Word. Live by this book. It is the standard for your life. Keep your love for the Lord fresh and strong. And finally, be careful about your worldly associations and involvement. If you do these things, you can remain true to the Lord year after year. May God help you have that kind of commitment to Him!

Sources: Alan Carr, www.sermonnotebook.org; Adam Clarke, *Adam Clarke's Bible Commentary* (accessed from *Online Bible*), completed by 1832; Stephen Felker, *Devotional & Explanatory Notes on the Entire Bible* (Col. Hghts, VA: Published by Author), 2021; David M. Howard, Jr., *The New American Commentary: Joshua* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998); C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978 reprint); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 2 (Pasadena, CA: Thru The Bible Radio, 1983); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 5:30] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2017); Francis A. Schaeffer, *Joshua and the Flow of Biblical History* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1975); Warren Wiersbe, *Be Strong: Joshua* (Wheaton: SP Publications, 1993). Other sources listed in the footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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