

Chapter 23

The Book of Joshua comes to a close with the old soldier saying farewell to his leaders. His parting addresses (Chapters 23 and 24) were tinged with sadness, as are nearly everyone's last words. They expressed the deep concern of Joshua who observed a growing complacency on the part of Israel toward the remnants of the Canaanites, an easy acceptance of joint occupancy of the land which was to have been exclusively theirs. With Israel's enemies practically vanquished, Joshua knew well the danger of the people's "letting down." Before his departure from active leadership he felt compelled to warn them that continued obedience to God's commands was essential to continued enjoyment of His blessing.¹

Several years after the end of the Conquest and distribution of the land, knowing that his life was coming to an end, what action does Joshua take (vv. 1-2)? We do not know exactly where Joshua was, but he summoned Israel's leaders at a point when he was "old and well advanced in years," and when Yahweh had subdued Israel's enemies so that the nation was at rest.²

They had come without hesitation in response to Joshua's call to hear the last words of their great chief. It was a solemn meeting. No doubt Caleb was there, along with Eleazer the priest, and the soldiers of the Conquest who had exchanged their swords for plowshares and were now heads of families, elders, and judges.

What was the underlying theme of vv. 3-4? Avoiding any temptation to elevate himself, Joshua reminded the leaders of Israel that their enemies had been defeated solely because the Lord their God had fought for them as He had promised. The battles were the Lord's, not his. A psalmist reiterated this affirmation (Psalm 44:3).

What will be the fate of the remnant of Canaanites who remain in the land (vv. 4-5)? As for the Canaanites, who still lingered about the country, He assured them that the Lord ... God would drive them out so that Israel could take possession of the land they partially occupied.³

What commands did Joshua give to the leaders (vv. 6-8)? Turning to impress the Israelites with their responsibility, Joshua passed on the very words Yahweh had armed him with when He instructed him to cross the Jordan: Be ... strong; be careful to obey (cf. 1:6-9). Courage and obedience were the virtues that led to the successful conquest of Canaan, and they were no less essential now (cf. 22:5).

Specifically, Joshua dreaded Israel's conformity to the heathen nations around them so he forbade all contact and fraternization, knowing that his people would backslide step by step till, in the course of their decline, they would prostrate themselves before the shrines of the pagan deities (cf. 23:16). Instead, he exhorted them to hold fast to the Lord (cf. 22:5).⁴

However, he also urged the leaders to remain loyal to Yahweh, because this was the condition for Yahweh to drive the remaining Canaanites out. Joshua passed on to Israel the secret of success and prosperity that the Lord had given him at the beginning of the Conquest [1:6-7, 9, 18]. God's promise (concerning occupation of the land) was not unconditional; Israel's faithfulness was required."⁵

What was Joshua's message in vv. 9-10? Returning to his theme, Joshua again affirmed God's past faithfulness to Israel. Yahweh fought their battles for them (cf. v. 3), and though some of the Canaanites still remained in the land, wherever an enemy had been encountered he had been overcome. Joshua, like Moses, instructed the people to love God as well as to obey Him.

What was the clear admonition of v. 11? Israel was then solemnly exhorted, on the basis of divine interventions on their behalf, to love ... God (cf. 22:5). This would require diligence and watchfulness because of the near presence of their corrupt neighbors. The temptation would be strong to forsake Yahweh and cleave to the people of Canaan, even intermarrying with them, a fateful decision and one fraught with peril to Israel.

What was the warning of vv. 12-13? This danger of associating with the Canaanites was graphically described by Joshua in terms of the dire consequences that would follow. First, God would no longer drive out these nations, but they would remain to mar Israel's inheritance. Second, the Canaanites among them would be like snares and traps to entangle them, whips to lash them, and thorns that fly back into their faces stabbing their eyes. Third, miseries and troubles would increase for Israel until they would be dispossessed of their good land (cf. 23:15-16.).

Joshua did not contemplate any possibility of neutrality as he posed the choice to be made. They would either go with Israel's God or the people of Canaan. So it is today. There is no middle course. "No one can serve two masters" (Matthew 6:24; cf. Matthew 12:30).⁶

The grave danger of crossing the Jordan River, facing an enemy in a strange land, encountering the unknown on every hand, and meeting fear on every side, had kept Israel close to the Lord. Joshua recognized that now since they had entered into rest and were enjoying prosperity and plenty, they would drift away from God. That is the story of human nature. It never changes.⁷

How did Joshua begin his closing statement (v. 14)? Like a masterful preacher, Joshua restated his discourse, this time emphasizing that he was a dying man, hoping that this would make his words sink more deeply into their hearts. Once more, he spoke of God's precise faithfulness to every promise. Not even one had failed.

What was the warning of vv. 15-16? Once again he warned of the doom caused by disobedience. Joshua's deep anxiety was about the nations that were left in the land. As the old soldier looked into the future, he foresaw Israel's sinful compromise with them and the tragic fate that would inevitably overtake the people of God. God's anger would burn against them, and they would perish from the good land He had given them.

The terrible climax of this message to the nation's leaders emphasized the fact that Israel's greatest danger was not military—it was moral and spiritual. If Joshua were alive today the strong likelihood is that he would say the same thing to this nation.⁸

In this chapter, the old veteran spoke on one theme—God's unfailing faithfulness to Israel and their corresponding responsibility to be faithful to Him. Three times he repeated his central message (vv. 3-8, 9-13, 14-16). Three times, fearful they would not hear.⁹

¹ Donald K. Campbell, "Joshua" in the Bible Knowledge Commentary: J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 367.

² Dr. Thomas L. Constable, Notes on Joshua, 2025 Edition (published by Sonic Light), 145.

³ Donald K. Campbell, "Joshua" in the Bible Knowledge Commentary: J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 368.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Dr. Thomas L. Constable, Notes on Joshua, 2025 Edition (published by Sonic Light), 145.

⁶ Donald K. Campbell, "Joshua" in the Bible Knowledge Commentary: J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 368.

⁷ Dr. Thomas L. Constable, Notes on Joshua, 2025 Edition (published by Sonic Light), 146.

⁸ Donald K. Campbell, "Joshua" in the Bible Knowledge Commentary: J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 368.

⁹ Ibid., 367.