

An Old Soldier's Farewell

Second in Command: Life of Joshua – Part VIII

Joshua 23-24

Introduction

There is something very powerful; very moving; very important about the last words spoken by an individual.

I think of William Carey, a man who, sent by the Baptist Society, was the first missionary to India. That was over one hundred fifty years ago, yet we still talk about him today. In fact, today he is called, "The Father of Modern Missions". Carey was the individual who coined the phrase, "Expect great things from God, attempt great things for God." This great missionary statesman in his final hours on his deathbed, said to a close associate, "When I am gone, say nothing of William Carey, but say much of William Carey's Savior."

I think, as well, of Charles Haden Spurgeon, a man who, as a young man in his teens, was preaching to thousands. By the time he reached his twenties, his church in London had ten thousand people coming to hear him speak every Sunday. He was a master communicator, who is still being modeled today in seminaries. He was a self-taught theologian, yet so brilliant that he is still being quoted today. This brilliant man, on his deathbed, said to an associate, "The older I have become, the more simple my theology has become, 'Jesus loves me.'"

It was about three years ago that my father-in-law was taken ill. His heart was failing him; his time unexpectedly short. All of the family had arrived in Atlanta, from all over. We would take turns going into the intensive care unit and were only allowed a few moments at a time. One of the times that I

happened to be in the room, he awoke from his sleep. He was attached to every apparatus available; he had a tube down his throat to help his breathing. He looked up at me and I looked down at him, and I said, "I love you, Pop." He formed words around that pipe, that would become his last words to me, and said, "I love you."

The Bible is filled with moving farewells. It is interesting that God would include the record.

I think of Joseph, lying on his deathbed in Egypt, calling his brothers in, and in his last moments, saying basically, "Stay true. God will give you the land. And, by the way, when you leave here and go to take the inheritance, take my bones with you. I want to be buried in the promised land."

I think of Paul, who said his farewell to the Ephesian elders on the dock, as they wept and embraced. He told them, "I know that none of you will ever see me again. Therefore, . . ." – and Acts chapter 20 records his moving farewell.

Nowhere in the scriptures, however, is more detail given to a farewell than to that of Joshua's. I invite you, for the last time in our study of the book of Joshua, to turn to Joshua chapter 23. His farewells take two entire chapters. There are two moving events in which he says farewell to the leaders and then, he says his final words to the people that he loved and had led for years.

Key Elements In Joshua's Farewell Address

Look at Joshua 23:1-2.

Now it came about after many days, when the Lord had given rest to Israel from all their enemies on every side, and Joshua was old, advanced in years, that Joshua called for all Israel, for their elders and their heads and their judges and their officers, and said to them, "I am old, advanced in years."

In other words, "Here's my farewell speech."

I would imagine all of the officers, and heads, and clan tribal leaders edged forward to see their godly old leader and to hear his final farewell. This was it.

Joshua's challenge, basically, alternated between two points:

- God's faithfulness to them;
- Their faithfulness to God.

Joshua will rotate between these two points in what must have been a very well planned speech. We will not take the time to dissect every phrase, but I want to highlight some of the elements of his farewell words – they demand highlighting.

1. First, in Joshua's farewell address, we find the element of humility.

This great leader gives God all of the credit. Look at Joshua 23:3.

And 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 been fighting for you.

In other words, "Don't ever forget, Israel, the reason you have been victorious in the land. There isn't room in Canaan for the 'Self-Made Man' syndrome."

Joshua did not want the soldiers sitting around the campfire, years later, challenging each other with their exploits. He did not want them saying, "Well, I did this and I did that . . ."

There would be only one entry in "Canaan's Hall of Fame" – God. Joshua, as the leader, set that tone.

Skip to Joshua 23:9-10a.

For the Lord has driven out great and strong nations from before you; and as for you, no man has stood before you to this day. One of your men puts to flight a thousand, . . .

How can one of their men put to flight a thousand? Continue to Joshua 23:10b.

. . . for the Lord your God is He who fights for you, just as He promised you.

In other words, "Israel, never lose sight of the fact that victory in the land of Canaan is because of God."

Canaan represents to us today, an illustration of the victorious Christian life. What we do for God is not the impressive part, but rather, what He does through us and in us. We are far too carried away with what we do for Him; we are far less impressed with what He does in us. That was Joshua's point, among others.

I remember hearing the testimony of a guy who came to the college I attended. Straight out of the African bush, Solomon Abiwalli had never been to America before. He flew to Chattanooga, Tennessee, never having seen the conveniences that we take for granted. In his testimony, he told of arriving at the airport and following the crowd to the baggage claim. The person who was supposed to be there to help him and take him to college, had not yet arrived. Solomon was confused and a little frightened. He got all of his bags, which held everything he owned, in his arms. He looked around and wondered where he was supposed to go. He saw something that looked like exit doors, so he started walking toward them. As he walked, with his hands loaded down, he wondered how he was ever going to get through those doors. As a committed believer, he prayed, "Lord, I need some help."

Immediately after praying, Solomon's foot hit the rubber mat and the doors flew open! He said, "I walked through and said, 'Lord, thank you.'"

Later, of course, he would learn that there was a source of power behind the doors that opened.

As cute as this was, it provides an important lesson for us today. We see doors opened; opportunities taken; achievements made in the Spirit's power as a result of prayer, yet our natural inclination is to say, "Look what I did!"

Joshua says, "I never want any of you to forget that your victory is a result of God – the power who fought behind you."

Twelve times in this chapter, in fact, Joshua will say the phrase,

. . . the Lord your God . . .

"God gave; God fought; God delivered – do not ever forget."

2. Secondly, in Joshua's farewell, we find the element of challenge.

In other words, "Obey the Word." Look at Joshua 23:6.

Be very firm, then, to keep and do all that is written in the book of the law of Moses, so that you may not turn aside from it to the right hand or to the left

The book of the law of Moses was the Pentateuch – Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy. The Israelites had that, in form, to follow. Joshua says, "You stick by the book and you, as a nation, will succeed."

Joshua was going back to the challenge of God to him in chapter 1, "You follow it and you will live, as a nation."

I read of a recent court ruling that banned a high school student from reading his Bible in study hall on his own initiative. I also read a quote from the *L. A. Times*. A syndicated columnist had the guts to write these words and I want to read them to you. I don't want to be insensitive with the content, but you will get the picture.

The Bible is America's most banned book. Ask yourself why condoms are now distributed freely in the public schools and why the Bible is banned, and you will begin to understand why our cultural fabric is unraveling.

Well said.

If Joshua were alive in America today, I have no doubt in my mind that he would say, "America, you have become a technological giant, but a moral, spiritual infant."

Why? Because we have abandoned the challenge Joshua gave to the Israelite nation of, "Stick by the book and you will live."

3. Thirdly, in Joshua's farewell, there is the element of caution.

Joshua gives the Israelites a warning concerning compromise. Look at Joshua 23:7.

so that you will not associate with these nations, these which remain among you, or mention the name of their gods, or make anyone swear by them, or serve them, or bow down to them.

Note the descending order from first, peaceful fellowship, to ultimately, pagan worship.

Look back at the verse again, "Don't associate with them. What fellowship has light with darkness? We are in the world to win the world, but they are not to be our intimate associates. If you don't follow this advice, you will begin to mention the name of their gods."

When the dialogue begins, there is an acknowledgement of the possibility that these other gods may exist. Then, it is likely that they will begin to swear by them; that is, they will contract business upon the ethics of the pagans, who swear by their gods in contractual form. It would follow, that they would be led into serving them and ultimately, to bow down to them.

What might begin as innocent fellowship could lead to pagan idolatrous worship. So Joshua warns; he cautions that the greatest threat to Israel was spiritual and moral compromise.

I have read of and admired the works of early church leaders, such as Tertullian, who led the early church in North Africa in the second century. Tertullian was a great theologian and was the one who coined the phrase "the Trinity". There was trouble in this early church because believers, especially the craftsmen, had gotten caught up in actually making the idols the pagans were worshipping. They crafted them, and polished them, and sold them. Tertullian confronted these craftsmen on one occasion, as to why they were making the idols.

The craftsmen logically expounded their reasons, saying, "Well, somebody is going to do it. This is our craft. Besides, we have to live and we need the money."

Tertullian responded, when they said they needed the money, with the question, "Why?"

They thought for a moment and said, "Because we need to buy food."

"Why?"

"Well, we must live."

"Why?"

Ladies and gentlemen, you and I have only one "must" in our lives – we must serve the Lord. That involves honor and worship and love – everything else is a result of that decision. We will look at this more in a moment.

An Important Verse In Joshua's Farewell Address

Now turn to Joshua chapter 24. We will move to the second event in Joshua's farewell speech.

Following Joshua's historical review, in Joshua 24:1-13, he now summarizes his farewell speech. Like a good preacher, he moves for the verdict; he tries to point the people toward the conclusion.

Look at Joshua 24:14, as Joshua is coming to the end.

Now, therefore, fear the Lord and serve Him in sincerity and truth; and put away the gods which your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord.

The next verse is frequently misinterpreted. Let us take a look at Joshua 24:15.

If it is disagreeable in your sight to serve the Lord, choose for yourselves today whom you will serve: whether the gods . . . which were beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites

. . .

In this verse, we usually notice and misinterpret the phrase,

. . . choose for yourselves today whom you will serve . . .

We think this means to either choose the Lord or other gods. That is not what Joshua said. Look at the verse again. He said,

. . . serve the Lord . . .

In other words, "If you do not serve the Lord, then you need to make a choice among the remaining gods. Which one do you want? You've got the gods beyond the River, who were proven impotent by the power of God during the plagues. If you don't like them, what else do you have? You have the gods of the Amorites – Moloch, who demands that you sacrifice your children."

Joshua is making his point – if you do not serve God, what do you have left? What rotten choices remain, if you do not serve Him?

Let me break this phrase, in Joshua 24:15, down a little more.

- Let us look at the word "choose".

It is interesting that the tense indicates continuous action. He is not saying, "Choose one time to serve the Lord and that will last the rest of your lifetime."

Joshua is saying, "Make a choice every day of your life."

When you get up in the morning, you have one primary question, "Whose slave am I? Who am I going to serve today?"

Yesterday's choice may not work today, unless it is reiterated in your heart that, "Today, I am going to serve God."

Joshua is a hundred-plus year old man, yet he is saying in the last part of this verse,

. . . but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.

Joshua is not a young twenty-five year old or a thirty year old newly married guy. No, he is over a hundred years old; he is a crusty old general, and he is saying, "By the way, I'm choosing to serve God today."

- After Joshua says, "choose," he then goes on to say, "choose for yourselves".

The King James Version says, "choose you". I like that. The emphasis is on the personal; on the "you". You cannot have someone make your choice for you – you have to choose.

Do you go to church on Sunday because your spouse wants you to or because your parents make the choice for you? Do you say grace before meals because it is good for your children to see? Do you own a Bible because every good American owns at least one? How personal is your choice to serve the Lord?

- Joshua then says, "choose for yourselves today whom you will serve".

Notice that he does not say, "choose for yourselves today whom you will worship". Why? Because Joshua understood that whoever you serve; whoever calls the shots in your life; whoever you are living for – they are your god. So choose today whom you will serve.

The Israelite's response and Joshua's strange retort

Joshua is practicing excellent speech making in this farewell address. He will now, draw the net.

Let us look at the Israelite people's response. Look at Joshua 24:16.

The people answered and said, "Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods;"

Skip to the last phrase of Joshua 24:18.

. . . We also will serve the Lord, for He is our God.

This has been great! Joshua has delivered this message and all the people said, “Yes, we will serve the Lord!”

So what is Joshua’s next phrase? Continue to Joshua 24:19a.

Then Joshua said to the people, “You will not be able to serve the Lord . . .”

Now wait a second! Joshua just asked, “All those who want to serve the Lord, raise your hand.”

Two million hands went into the air.

Then, Joshua said, “Put those hands down.”

It looks as if he is trying to lose his chance to win the prize for the highest number of evangelistic responses in one single service. What is Joshua doing? I think his words will become clear as we read a little further.

Look at Joshua 24:20.

If you forsake the Lord and serve foreign gods, then He will turn and do you harm and consume you after He has done good to you.”

Continue to Joshua 24:21-22.

The people said to Joshua, “No, but we will serve the Lord.” Joshua said to the people, “You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen for yourselves the Lord, to serve Him.” And they said, “We are witnesses.”

The clue comes in Joshua 24:23. This verse gives us the reason Joshua is acting the way he is.

Now therefore, put away the foreign gods which are in your midst, and incline your hearts to the Lord, the God of Israel.

Oh, Joshua’s behavior makes sense now! The Israelites were pledging with their lips, but they were lying with their lives. They were saying, “We will serve the Lord; He’s the only God.” – while in their tents, they had the little rain idol, just in case the rain did not come through; they had the little sunshine god, just in case they did not get enough sun. The Israelite people had backup gods in their tents, while before Joshua, they were saying, “We will serve the Lord.”

Joshua says, “Oh yeah? Then burn all the other bridges behind you.”

Unfortunately, we do the same kind of thing. We stand in church and sing,

My Jesus, I love Thee, I know Thou art mine;

For Thee all the follies of sin I resign.

My gracious Redeemer, my Savior art Thou;

If ever I loved Thee, my Jesus, ‘tis now.

While we think, “Only, send rain when I need it.” or, “Only, give me that promotion.” or, “Only, cause my children to be healthy.”

In other words, we are really singing, “My Jesus, I love thee, but You’ll need to earn it.”

Joshua pulled the mask off of their lip service and said, “If you mean it, then live by it. You should have no alternate gods; no back ups, in case God does not pull through like you want.”

The Last Paragraph Of These Chronicles – Three Funerals

Now, the last paragraph of the book of Joshua is rather odd. In fact, what a way to end it. Three burials are mentioned. I believe, however, that this is included for a very powerful reason.

1. The first funeral is Joshua’s, in Joshua 24:29-30.

It came about after these things that Joshua the son of Nun, the servant of the Lord, died, being one hundred and ten years old. And they buried him in the territory of his inheritance in Timnath-serah . . .

2. The second burial is Joseph’s bones, in Joshua 24:32.

Now they buried the bones of Joseph, which the sons of Israel brought up from Egypt, at Shechem, in the piece of ground which Jacob had bought from the sons of Hamor . . .

3. The third funeral is Eleazar’s, the son of Aaron, in Joshua 24:33.

And Eleazar the son of Aaron died; and they buried him at Gibeah of Phinehas his son, which was given him in the hill country of Ephraim.

Why is this so powerful? It is proof that God keeps His word.

To Joshua, God promised that if he would obey His Word and meditate on it day and night, he would have success and would inherit the land. Where is Joshua buried? In the land.

Joseph told his brothers that if they remained true to God, according to God's own promise to his forefather Abraham, they would one day leave Egypt and inherit the land. He asked them to take his bones with them. Where is Joseph buried? In the land.

Where is Eleazar, the priestly son of Aaron, buried? In the land.

Each one of these funerals declared, "God keeps His word."

Growing up in Norfolk, Virginia, I used to run around the streets with all the other missionary kids. My father was a missionary to the military there. In those days, the Navy boys wore their blues and their whites and their funny looking "Oreo" hats, we called them, although not to their faces. We would run around that town and scamper here and explore there. One of our favorite places to go, in downtown Norfolk, was the MacArthur Memorial. We knew every inch of that place. In fact, right in the center of the huge marble lobby was a large round hole where they had laid the bodies of Douglas MacArthur and his wife. There was a brass banister at the top where you could stand and look down at the place where they were buried. One time, when no one was looking, I jumped down and touched the grave so I could say I had been there. I have carried that secret for twenty years. I thought I would confess it before you.

For those of you who are not as familiar with this man, MacArthur was the five-star general who commanded the Southwest Pacific fleet in World War II. He was also put in charge of reconstructing Japan, after that nation had been obliterated by war. On one occasion, MacArthur actually plead for evangelical missionaries. He said, "Send me a thousand missionaries to this country. It is a ripe harvest field."

I still remember in vivid detail, although I was only a kid of barely four, his funeral procession in downtown Norfolk. Thousands of people lined the streets; my family among them. I can still remember the horse-drawn carriage, his casket, overlaid with flag and flowers, the rows of soldiers behind it, the jets flying overhead, and the gun salutes. MacArthur was a great soldier.

I also remember, in the MacArthur Memorial, watching a black and white movie a thousand times.

It showed him and all of his conquests and ended with his farewell speech to Congress on April 19, 1951. He stood before that august body and said words that are etched into my memory. Some of them will be familiar to you as well. He said,

The world has turned over many times since I first took the oath on the plain at West Point, and the hopes and dreams have long since vanished, but I still remember the refrain of one of the most popular barrack ballads of that day which proclaimed most proudly that old soldiers never die; they just fade away.

And like the old soldier of that ballad, I now close my military career and just fade away, an old soldier who tried to do his duty as God gave him the light to see that duty. Good-bye.

I remember, even as a kid, getting goose bumps as the Congress of the United States stood and gave him a standing ovation that lasted for minutes.

I wonder if we will be able to say, like MacArthur and like Joshua, at the end of our lives, "We, like a good soldier, have done our duty; have accomplished our mission; have grasped the opportunity; have seized the ministry that God gave us to do."

Whether it is in raising children, washing dishes, handling an executive position, fixing cars, or studying, we need more soldiers whose lives are marked with humility, perseverance, and courage; more soldiers who come to the end of their lives and say, "I have done my duty"; more soldiers who pass to the next generation, the powerful testimony that God is faithful and worthy of trust; more soldiers who challenge the next generation to be faithful to God.

Are you one of these soldiers?

Listen to the words of this song that will form a fitting conclusion.

We're pilgrims on the journey

Of the narrow road

And those who've gone before us line the way

Cheering on the faithful, encouraging the weary

Their lives a stirring testament to God's sustaining grace

Surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses

*Let us run the race, not only for the prize
But as those who've gone before us
Let us leave to those behind us
The heritage of faithfulness passed on
through godly lives*

Chorus:

*Oh may all who come behind us find us
faithful*

May the fire of our devotion light their way

May the footprints that we leave

Lead them to believe

And the lives we live inspire them to obey.

*Oh may all who come behind us find us
faithful*

*After all our hopes and dreams have come
and gone*

*And our children sift through all we've left
behind*

*May the clues that they discover and the
memories they uncover*

*Become the light that leads them to the road
we each must find*

Repeat Chorus

*Oh may all who come behind us find us
faithful*

*Oh may all who come behind us find us
faithful.*

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 1/26/1992 by Stephen Davey.

© Copyright 1992 Stephen Davey

All rights reserved.