

Joshua 23

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Date: 08 January 2012

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[0:00] And I'd like to invite you to turn back in the Bibles to Joshua chapter 23, which we read earlier, which you'll find on page 239. 239.

Famous last words have become something of an institution. Sometimes they're tragic, sometimes they're humorous, sometimes a mixture of both, as in the case of General John Sedgwick, who was apparently a Union commander in the American Civil War, and who was killed in battle in 1864, and those who were with him recalled his famous last words as being, they couldn't hit an elephant at that distance.

Apparently that is true. Sometimes they're disparaging last words, like Karl Marx, who told his housekeeper, who was hovering at his bedside, ready to write down his last words for posterity, that last words are for fools who haven't said enough.

But the last words, or the closing speeches of the Bible, have much more serious content and far deeper significance. And if you think about it, there are lots of last words in the Bible.

The final speeches of Jacob, for example, blessing his twelve sons. Moses, as he prepares the people to enter the Promised Land. David, at the end of his long reign and life.

[1:33] And especially, of course, the Lord Jesus himself. His famous last words in John 13 to 17, what we often call the Upper Room Discourse.

They are all major features of Scripture. And here we have Joshua's parting discourses. In fact, at the end of the book of Joshua, there are three speeches that he makes.

Chapter 22, before our chapter, he says farewell to the two and a half tribes who are going back across the Jordan to resettle in their allotted territories.

They've been helping with the conquest of Canaan. They're now dispatched back home east of the Jordan. And Joshua gives them parting words. Chapter 24, after our chapter, the last chapter of the book, is his address to the whole nation as he calls them to choose whom they're going to serve. Whether it will be the Lord or other gods. And that famous assertion of Joshua, as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord. And here in between, chapter 23, is a chapter that gives his last words to the leaders, the people who are responsible for the government of the nation, the elders, the leaders, the judges, and officials.

[2:52] As Joshua passes on the baton, he says, I'm old and well advanced in years. We know later in the book that he died at the age of 110. And so we're probably about 20, 25 years from the time when they first crossed the Jordan to enter the land.

And you know the book of Joshua is all about the conquest of the land from the fall of Jericho and they marched around it seven times and the walls fell flat, right the way through to the allocation of all the territory that God gave them in the land of Canaan.

And this chapter, at the end, is both a looking back and a looking forward. I think it's appropriate for January. We're here on the second Sunday, but we're still at the beginning of a new year.

January named after Janus, the god of paganism, who looked back and looked forward, the two-faced god. Well, it's a good thing at the beginning of a year, isn't it, to look back in thanksgiving and to renew our faith and commitment as we look forward in hope to what God has for us.

So I hope this will be an appropriate message, both for this time of the year and also for our own minds and hearts as we think about the faithfulness of God. So in verse 1, we get the scene set.

[4:05] That long time refers to the period of the conquest. And if you read the book, you'll find some very exciting stories of how God gave the land to his people. The key to it all is there in those opening verses.

Have a look with me at verse 3. You yourselves have seen everything the Lord your God has done to all these nations for your sake. It was the Lord your God who fought for you.

So this is the story of the book. That God has been in control of a whole situation. That he has led the people under Joshua to accomplish his plans and purposes.

But supremely, God has been fulfilling his promises all the way through the story. And now Joshua, near the end of his life, is concerned that the people who will follow him will be as committed to this God and to his word, as trusting in him as he has been, and as prepared to launch out in faith to see God work in their generation as Joshua has seen it in his own.

Now, there's a progression in the chapter which I think divides into three sections. Verses 3 to 8, 9 to 13, and 14 to 16.

[5:21] And the reason I say that is because you'll see if you look with me at the opening verse of each section that there's a similarity in the way in which Joshua approaches it. So verse 3 talks about everything the Lord has done for you, how the Lord has fought for you.

Verse 8 talks about the Lord has driven out before you great and powerful nations to this day. And then verse 14, where Joshua talks about his own imminent departure.

But he says, you know that not one of all the good promises of the Lord your God has failed. Every promise has been fulfilled. Not one has failed. Now, like many a good preacher after him, Joshua repeats his big idea three times.

In each of the paragraphs, this fantastic truth, this central assertion, that everything that they are now experiencing, the lands that they have not themselves won, but that God has given them as they've trusted him and experienced his power at work through them.

Everything that is theirs today is theirs because God has chosen them, God has promised, and God has fulfilled his promises. But he doesn't just repeat himself.

[6:34] It begins by looking back, but as the speech goes on, he becomes increasingly concerned about the present and about the future, and particularly about warnings that he feels he needs to give because it is as easy to lose the blessings as it has been to receive them by God's grace.

So I want to look at this Old Testament preacher's message to his generation. And as we do that, I'm sure we'll find many parallels to us. And as we see it coming to its fruition in the Lord Jesus, we can find encouragement, yes, and challenge for the year that lies ahead of us.

Look with me firstly then at what I want to describe as what you have seen. What you have seen.

That is verses 3 to 8. And not surprisingly, at the end of this long and eventful life, Joshua starts by looking back.

But he's not a nostalgia buff. He's not looking back in self-indulgence. He's not saying, oh, those were the days, weren't they? What he's doing is reminding his audience of how dependent they are on God for everything that they have.

He calls upon the leaders to review their common experience of God's goodness, to remember what God has done, and the immense changes that they've witnessed in their lifetime, and the daily benefits that they receive from the hands of the Lord.

[7:58] Now that is always a sound spiritual instinct. Not to forget all his benefits and blessings. And as we start a new year, we should look back with thanksgiving.

We've been doing that in our worship this morning. As we praise God for his faithfulness to us, for the way in which he's led us, some of us through particularly difficult circumstances in recent days, some of us in particularly joyful ways.

We've all got a variety of experience, but at the heart of it all, there is the faithfulness of God to his word and to his promises. And as we review that, and do not forget his benefits, as we give thanks, and discipline ourselves in our own personal times of devotion, to recall the blessings of God, that will generate our faith for the future.

We look back and see that all the blessings we now enjoy have been God's gracious gift to us. And that makes us realise how dependent we are on him for every day of this new year, every day of our lives, for every breath that we breathe.

That's why the New Testament is always concerned that godly people are thankful people. You can tell how, in a sense, what your spiritual health is like in terms of how thankful you are to God.

[9:18] How thankful you are that God is God. That this is his character. That he is faithful to all his promises, that he is always carrying out what he commits himself to do.

Thankful too for the circumstances of our lives, for the overruling providence by which he guides us and directs us and opens doors for us and shuts other doors, keeps us from dangers, directs us in the way, as every day we commit our way to him.

And we pray, Lord, today I want to submit myself to your authority, to your lordship. There will be many, many things that we can thank God for, supremely, that he sent his son, the Lord Jesus, to die on that cross in our place.

And that we have access into his presence this morning. We've been able to pray. We know our sins have been forgiven. We know that we go out with the Holy Spirit within us to change us from the inside out.

These are the great blessings of being a Christian. Be a thankful Christian. And it's never too early to start. I worked with a man called Lee Samuel, who some of you may know in my early years in ministry.

[10:22] And Lee Samuel used to say to his congregation, if you want to be a gracious old lady, be a gracious young lady. And if you want to be a faithful old man, be a faithful young man. In other words, you build every day of your life a character, an attitude.

You become who you are because of practice. And we can practice being faithful, thankful, rejoicing people in all that the Lord has given us.

Now, in this context, Joshua draws special attention to what he calls the nations. Back in verse 3, you yourselves have seen everything the Lord your God has done to all these nations. It's really a technical term for anyone, any nation, that is outside the covenant of God's grace.

And that means every nation except Israel at this point in Old Testament history. Seven times in this chapter, he refers to the nations. Now, they have been, of course, opposing what God has been doing in giving the land to his people.

And many of those nations have fought tooth and nail against the conquest. But as verse 4 tells us, remember how I have allotted as an inheritance for your tribes all the land of the nations that remain, and these are the nations that I conquered.

[11:41] The I is Joshua speaking, but speaking as the agent of God, that I have conquered between the Jordan and the Mediterranean. And the Lord your God himself will drive them out of your way.

So here is the great blessings that God has given. Again and again, the book has shown us that it's God who has granted Israel victory as he promised.

And already the land has been divided up and allotted to the tribes and to the family units, including those parts of the land which are still unconquered at this point.

But looking back to what has been accomplished is a tremendous stimulus to go on believing for the future. There's no shortage of ability with God. He's the one who has driven them out and will drive them out.

He will push them on before you and you will take possession of their land as the Lord your God promised you. Now we're in a very different position of course.

[12:42] We're not driving out tribes from another land or anything like that. But as the people of God, in a world where there is hostility against the word of God and the purposes of God, in a world where people very often turn their backs upon God when things get hard and difficult, we need to remind ourselves as we look back on what we have seen that there is no shortage of ability with God.

His name is the Lord and whenever you see the Lord in capital letters in the Old Testament, it's the covenant name of God, Yahweh, Jehovah, the I am who I am, the unchanging, 100% dependable, ever faithful God.

And what he has done, he will continue to do. Now when we get to the second part of the chapter, that's what he's saying in verse 9. If you look down at verse 9, the Lord has driven out before you great and powerful nations.

To this day, no one has been able to withstand you. One of you raps a thousand because the Lord your God fights for you just as he promised.

See how he takes them back to the power that is God's power. It's so easy for us, isn't it, to bring God down to our level. For us to have effectively a pocket-sized God whom we do sincerely believe in but whom we feel that the pressures and the problems and the anti-Christian forces that are at work all the way through our culture, they're really too big.

[14:18] Too big for us to deal with. And we sometimes tend to think too big for God to deal with. And we need to remember that the promises of God are what dictate the purposes of God.

That God is committed to building his church. That he is committed to bringing an innumerable company of men and women from every tribe and kindred and nation out of the darkness into the marvellous light of Christ.

I went to preach in a church not too far from here in West London a few years ago, probably three or four years ago. And I was interviewed about the Cornhill training course and I shared a little bit about the numbers of students that we had and the variety of backgrounds they came from, different nationalities and so on.

And at the end a gentleman came up to me and he said, I'm really surprised by what you said in the interview this morning. So I said, why? And he said, well, to think that young people who are apparently quite able and who could be earning a good living in various ways will be giving themselves to train for Christian ministry which is such a defeated and out of date thing.

I'm just amazed that you would have anybody who wanted to do it. So I said to him, how long have you been coming to this church? Oh, about 20 years. You see, it's so easy, isn't it, to get down into the way that the world thinks that Christianity is finished, that it's had it, that there's no real way in which it could ever impact our culture and to take our judgment from BDC2 or Channel 4 or the Sunday papers or whatever it is and to think that Christianity really has gone, its day is over.

[16:00] But what the world is governed by is the promises of God. the faithfulness of God who is the creator. And if you put the promises of God against the admittedly huge challenges of the present situation, then you begin to see when you look back and as you see what God has done in the past and indeed what God has done in our lives, that of all these promises, not one has failed.

Can you think of a promise of God that he's not been faithful to? Of course not. He's delivered us in the blessing of our conversion from the world and the flesh and the devil.

He's given us the knowledge of sins forgiven. He enables us to grow in grace and in godliness of character. We're all testimonies of God's rich resources and covenant commitment to us, his people.

But you know, no faith is strong if it isn't a growing faith. No virtue is safe if it is not an enthusiastic virtue. None of us is secure if we are not totally dependent on God's grace and mercy.

what you have seen teaches us that the world is governed by the word of God. And the word is the active expression of the will and purpose of God that he carries out through his son and in the power of his spirit.

[17:30] Second thing that he says, not what you have seen but what you must understand. Come back with me to verse 7. Here, he is commanding the people to be strong and careful to obey the Lord's word.

And then in verse 7, do not associate with these nations that remain among you. Don't invoke the names of their gods or swear by them. You must not serve them or bow down to them.

But you're to hold fast to the Lord your God. Now here is the danger. We could call it complacency. A good proportion of the land has been taken.

But there is still very much more to be possessed. If that's going to happen, Joshua knows that it will require razor sharp clarity, trusting the promises, and wonderfully renewed energy from God if they are going to pursue his purposes and take over the whole land.

And what they've seen is that God fights for his people when his people are active and obedient in doing his will. He didn't do it all for them.

[18:41] They had to have an army. They had to have battles. Sometimes there was no battle like Jericho. Other times there were battles in which they had to fight. But all the energy and dynamic for the victories that

they experienced belonged to the Lord.

and those qualities are available as his people continue to fight the good fight. But the danger is that they will settle for a comfortable level of compromise that doesn't inquire, doesn't really require such discipline or sacrifice or commitment.

And then the process of verse 7 will take over. And they will gradually merge with the pagan nations that remain in the land mixing with those people beginning to listen to the to what they're told about their gods.

Worshipping those gods more and more because they're much less demanding than the God of Israel. They're much more easily influenced than the God of truth and righteousness.

righteousness. And so they're much more attractive as a religious option because you can control them. Of course we know that they're actually lifeless lumps of wood and stone, artifacts made by the hands of men.

[19:57] But they're very attractive because this sort of God is in your pocket. And the real God isn't. And so the danger is acute. And verses 12 and 13 over the page warn them in some detail, sorry it's at the bottom of the page, warn them in some detail about the outcome of these things.

If you turn away, verse 12, and ally yourselves with the survivors of these nations that remain among you, and if you intermarry with them and associate with them, then you may be sure that the Lord your God will no longer drive out these nations before you.

Instead they will become snares and traps for you, whips on your back and thorns in your eyes, until you perish from this good land which the Lord your God has given you.

See here is the danger, that this sort of complacency will lead them to compromise, that they will in the end be indistinguishable from the people whom they're supposed to be replacing.

And if that happens, then God who owns the land will take it away from them and they will be dispossessed by the God who first gave it to them.

[21:11] Now that is a very powerful warning, isn't it? This is what we've got to understand, that there is no blessing that God gives us which, if we are unwilling to respond in faith and obedience, if we treat it lightly and compromise with the forces of godless evil around us, there is no blessing which is secure in itself unless we are positively related to God day by day.

Now of course the work of God is an eternal work, he saves us by his grace, he calls us as his people, he makes us his own. But our experience of the blessings of God are dependent upon that faith connection with him that trusts him and obeys him in all the varied circumstances of life.

And the big danger is that they will lose out on what they could enjoy because somehow they become more like the nations around them than like the separate people of God that he has called them to become.

You really don't need me to apply that. We see around us all sorts of idolatry. The messages that impact our lives every day are that life is found in this or that, anything other than God of miracles. And yes, here we are on Sunday morning, rightly rehearsing our faith in God, rightly giving ourselves at the beginning of another week to an hour or so by which our lives are set in shape with God and by which we are able to govern and direct our lives for the coming days.

[22:56] But you know that as soon as we leave here, and particularly tomorrow at work and at school and at college and in the hospital or wherever it is we are, those messages of the nations around us will bombard us again and again and again.

They will tell us that what you really need is to look like this or to own that or to have this experience or to be that sort of person. And again and again as the world and the flesh and the devil impinge upon us, our danger is that we become complacent in the blessings we have and then we begin to compromise and we begin to just drift a little here and a little there and before we know where we are, we are really not very distinguishable from the world around us.

Idolatry is powerful because it is something we think we can control. It's much easier to follow the idols of my heart than to submit that heart to the true and living God.

He will make demands of me. He will acquire holiness in my life. He will not want me to be making those compromises. And in his mercy and his love he cares for us enough not to let us get away

with it.

So what Joshua is saying to these people is true for all covenant people in the new as well as in the old covenant. That while all the blessings that we enjoy are out of God's pure grace and because of his mercy and love to us and he is an everlasting father and a God of covenant mercy who will never let us go and never let us down.

[24:29] Nevertheless we are not to be complacent about that. If we want to experience that in our lives then we must look out for the tendency to compromise. We must look out at those areas where we are becoming much more like the world than like the Lord Jesus.

And we must in our need cling to him and ask him for his grace and help to enable us to think straight and then to live straight in our generation as the people of the living God.

The last thing that he says is really that, the future, how you must live. What you've seen, everything you have is God's good gift to you and that is true for us in Christ and in the gospel. What you must understand is that God will never turn his back upon his promises. But we can live as it were out of sync with God. We can be Christians who are Christian in name but in practice. We're not actually allowing God to change us. We're too easily slipping into the way that the world reacts. So what is the counteractive to that?

[25:37] The third thing he tells us is how you must live. What you've seen, what you must understand, how you must live. And I'm thankful that this practical instruction is so clear and applicable to us.

Just have a look with me at verse six. Be very strong, be careful to obey all that is written in the book of the Lord Moses without turning aside to the right or to the left.

Now if you know your Joshua, you'll know that that's what he was told in chapter one, right at the beginning of the book. To follow wholeheartedly all that God had revealed through Moses in the first five books of the Bible.

The seedbed of the whole Bible. The context there was the question as to whether Joshua would prove to be a worthy leader of Israel, a worthy successor to Moses.

And now as his wonderfully fruitful and successful life is reviewed at the end, this could really be a summary of it all. Indeed, when we come to the very last chapter, 24 and verse 29, we find that the last thing that we're told about Joshua is that he died 110 years old as the servant of the Lord.

[26:59] That's his official obituary, if you like. It's exactly the same language as was used of Moses. Moses died, never saw the promised land, but he was taken by God into his presence as the servant of the Lord.

And now Joshua, the next generation, is similarly given that accolade. He is the servant of the Lord. Because verse 6 has been the motto of his life.

Strength lies in obedience to the word of God, without deviation. The word of Jesus given to us in the New Testament, all the instructions he gave to his disciples, all that his spirit inspired the apostles to write as instructions for our lives in the epistles.

This is what leads to the separation from idolatry, which will give to us a Christian life that is pleasing to God and satisfying to us.

Because only the word of God can break the hold of the idols of our hearts. By revealing the false and stimulating the true, by leading us to trust God and then to obey him because we trust him, the way to conquer our idols, the way to live lives that count for God in our generation, is daily disciplined obedience to the word of God in scripture.

[28:27] If we trust him, we will obey him. If we don't obey him, it's because we don't really trust him. So we need to keep those channels open, the channels that say, yes, I do believe your word, Lord, I know that it's good and perfect.

I know that my sinful heart takes me away from it so often and I fail you so frequently, but today I'm coming back to you and asking you that that living, enduring word of God will shape my thinking, shape my living, direct my actions.

And it's as the word of God, in all the scriptures and supremely in the living word, the word made flesh, the Lord Jesus rules in our minds and hearts, that we are people who are useful in God's hands.

So that's the first thing, how you must live, you must allow every word of God, he says to his hearers, to shape your responses. But then it's more than that, verse 8.

But you are to cling to or hold fast to the Lord your God as you have until now. That word cling is a very strong adhesive verb.

[29:39] It's the Hebrew word for glue really. You are to be glued to God, he says. It was used of the husband cleaving to his wife and the two become one flesh. Now it speaks then of a total commitment, loyal devotion, deep affection.

It's a verb that was used in metal work of two metals being soldered together so that they cannot be separated. Now he says that's what your reaction to God is to be like.

That is what the Lord looks for from his people. To give ourselves to him. To cling to him. And the very poignant thing is that the verb is used again in verse 12.

Where it says if you turn away and ally yourselves. Now that is exactly the same verb as translated in verse 8 as hold fast. Exactly the same verse.

If you turn away and cling to the survivors of the nations. Stick to them. It's a really shocking thought that isn't it? That God's redeemed people could go back to paganism and be no different from the culture all around them.

[30:45] It's an almost unthinkable idea and yet which of us doesn't know how easily that drift can happen in our lives. So you've got to remain stuck to God.

It's true in our marriages. Good marriages don't just develop. They need investment, time, love, thought, speech, actions. They require commitment. And true knowledge of God doesn't just happen.

You've got to invest your time in it. You've got to give yourself to his word. You've got to spend time in his presence, in prayer. And as we cling to the Lord, then those things that would be snares and traps and whips and thorns in our experience because we're tempted to compromise, will be removed as we grow in our knowledge and love of him.

No, don't cling to the nations. Don't get stuck to the culture. Cling to the Lord your God. Be very careful to obey. You are to hold fast to the Lord.

And lastly, perhaps the greatest verse in the whole chapter, verse 11. So be very careful to love the Lord your God. See, that is the secret of the baton being passed in the next generation.

[32:03] Notice how intentional it is. Be very careful to love the Lord your God. Give your attention to it, he says. Make this the heart of your living and your discipleship.

Love the Lord your God. We know elsewhere in the Old Testament and endorsed by the Lord Jesus in the New, that that takes everything we have with all your heart and soul and mind and strength. It is the first and greatest commandment and the second is like it. Love your neighbour as yourself. On these hang all the law and the prophets. And this is the heart of our faith.

It's the heart of our relationship with God. So as I close, I want to encourage you to look on this year 2012 as a year of growing in your love for God. Now that doesn't mean just warm feelings, though there will be an emotional aspect to it.

But it means the sort of love that puts his concerns first. That says, what can I do for him? How can I serve him more? How can I give to him who gave so much for me?

[33:12] For me that love finds its focus in the Lord Jesus himself. We love him because he first loved us. And every time I look back at the cross, every time I see my own sinfulness and my own need of his grace, every time I remember how he gave himself up there for you and for me as he conquered all our enemies, sin and death and the devil, when he fought for us and achieved our salvation on the cross of Calvary.

And how through that we have entered into the rest of peace with God and knowing that our sins are forgiven and that our lives are in his safekeeping.

Every time I do that, my heart is moved to love him more. It's so weak and faint. Remember that hymn that says, Lord, it is my chief complaint that my love is weak and faint.

Yet I do love you and adore. Oh, for grace to love you more. And I want to ask you this morning, do you really love the Lord? Do you love him?

Are you prepared to give your life for him? Are you prepared to follow wherever he leads you? Is your confidence not in your record of what you've done for him, but in his record of what he's done for you?

[34:28] All that it means for him to be the Lord. That's what prompts from us this response of love that clings to him, that obeys him, and that says, oh Lord Jesus, I do want to be more like you.

And I do want my life to be a channel of love for you and love for others. If you love him, you'll express it in praise and worship. You'll feel it in the assurance of faith and deep gratitude. You'll want to speak well of him wherever you go, whenever you can. You'll want to serve him, to please him, to live for him. Yes, even to suffer and to die for him.

That's the challenge that Joshua presents to the up and coming generation. And it's the challenge that God continually presents to all our hearts, whether we're young or old, whether we're new Christians or have been on the road for many years.

It's the challenge we all face. As we look to the future, are we going to be people who because of what we've seen and because of what we understand, live lives that obey the truth, cling to the Lord and love him with everything we have?

[35:41] He'll give us the grace to do it if we're prepared to plug in to the supply. Let's pray.