

“Grace, Challenge and Warning”

Joshua 23

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I love Romans 8:38-39 “For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

But I’m bothered by Hebrews 3:14 “We have come to share in Christ **if we hold firmly** till the end the confidence we had at first.”

I’m encouraged by Philippians 1:6 “being confident of this, that he (God) who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until” Christ comes again.

But I’m troubled by 1 Corinthians 15:2 “By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you.”

I like Ephesians 2:8-9 “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith... not by works, so that no one can boast.”

But then I hear James 2:20 “faith without deeds is useless.”

Do I hear contradictions in those verses from the Bible?

I hear that a right relationship with God is by grace alone and then I hear that I have a responsibility.

Which is it?

We’ll let Joshua speak to that in a couple of minutes.

As I said last week, most people have an uneasy feeling about death and even a greater uneasiness about life after death.

They are concerned that there actually may be life after death and that they don’t have any control over what their place in it will be.

And so people live with an uneasy idea of God – afraid not to believe in him but ignorant of what to do about it.

They either have to convince themselves there is no God OR live with an uneasy conscience about God OR find out how to rightly relate to him.

The message of Joshua chapter 23 is for those who wish to rightly relate to God.

It is for those who are largely convinced of the existence of God and who then conclude that since he exists the only logical thing to do is to seek him and respond to him.

There is nothing in Joshua 23 for the person who thinks of God as nonexistent or irrelevant.

For 30 to 35 years, since the death of Moses, Joshua had been the leader of the people of Israel.

For the first 5-6 of those years he led the armies of Israel in the conquest of Canaan – that land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea.

Probably 25 or more years have passed since the last major battles subduing the inhabitants of Canaan (assuming Joshua was close in age to Caleb, Cf 14:10 and 24:29).

The Israelites have been settling down on their new land and in their new homes and continuing to force out the previous owners.

For those of you troubled by the morality of the Israelites killing or forcing the previous inhabitants out of Canaan, I refer you to the sermon on December 1 of last year when I dealt exclusively with that issue.

Joshua was a very old man and nearing death.

He gathered the leaders of the people around him and in this chapter and the next he gives his final address to the people.

Imagine yourself in his place and it was your loved ones you gathered around you.

Imagine you got past your preoccupation with your death and your greatest concern was those now around you.

This was your last chance to directly influence what they would think and do in their lives.

What would you say?

I have had the privilege of performing the marriage ceremonies for two of my daughters.

In both cases I was able to give a blessing.

I thought long and hard about exactly what I would say on those auspicious occasions.

As a result of those experiences, I can more easily imagine how Joshua must have felt as he sat before those leaders he loved so much and made his final appeal to them.

Stand please for the reading of God's Word.

Joshua 23 "After a long time had passed and the LORD had given Israel rest from all their enemies around them, Joshua, by then old and well advanced in years, summoned all Israel--their elders, leaders, judges and officials--and said to them: "I am old and well advanced in years. 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. Remember how I have allotted as an inheritance for your tribes all the land of the nations that remain--the nations I conquered--between the Jordan and the Great Sea in the west. The LORD your God himself will drive them out of your way. He will push them out before you, and you will take possession of their land, as the LORD your God promised you. "Be very strong; be careful to obey all that is written in the Book of the Law of Moses, without turning aside to the right or to the left. Do not associate with these nations that remain among you; do not invoke the names of their gods or swear by them. You must not serve them or bow down to them. But you are to hold fast to the LORD your God, as you have until now. "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 routs a thousand, because the LORD your God fights for you, just as he promised. So be very careful to love the LORD your God. "But if you turn away 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 backs and thorns in

your eyes, until you perish from this good land, which the LORD your God has given you.

"Now I am about to go the way of all the earth. You know with all your heart and soul that not one of all the good promises the LORD your God gave you has failed. Every promise has been fulfilled; not one has failed. But just as every good promise of the LORD your God has come true, so the LORD will bring on you all the evil he has threatened, until he has destroyed you from this good land he has given you. If you violate the covenant of the LORD your God, which he commanded you, and go and serve other gods and bow down to them, the LORD's anger will burn against you, and you will quickly perish from the good land he has given you."

What did you hear from Joshua?

I hope to demonstrate to you that Joshua's words are not just to the leaders of Israel but they are also **God's word to us** who call ourselves God's people.

What did you hear?

I hope you have heard both sides of what we looked at earlier:

Philippians 1:6 "being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus."

AND not "But", AND 1 Corinthians 15:2 "By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you."

Joshua does three things:

He emphasizes God's gracious intervention in their lives, he challenges them to believing-obedience, and he warns them.

I. Joshua starts with the emphasis on God's grace in their lives.

There is a great temptation to hear the commands and warnings of God whether from the Old Testament or the New without hearing the platform of grace from which those commands and warnings are issued.

The whole of our relationship with God begins and continues with grace – his grace to us.

Joshua makes that clear throughout his passionate appeal.

V1 The Lord gave you rest...

V3 The Lord your God has done...

V3 The Lord fought for you;

V5 The Lord will drive them out...

V9 The Lord has driven them out...

V10 And (the Lord) fights for you...

V13 The Lord gave you the land...

V14 “Not one of all the good promises the LORD your God gave you has failed.”

God’s call to us doesn’t begin with us doing anything, it begins with God doing.

Joshua 23:3-4 “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. Remember...”

Don’t even start thinking about obedience to God until you first think carefully about his grace.

1 John 4:19 “We love because he first loved us.

- You know God today because of what God did first.
- You are forgiven today because of what God did first.
- You have his Spirit with you today because of what God did first.
- You have the assurance of eternal life because of what God did first.

Or as Joshua said it in Joshua 23:14 “You know with all your heart and soul that not one of all the good promises the LORD your God gave you has failed. Every promise has been fulfilled; not one has failed.”

You know, not just with your head, but by experience in the very deepest part of your being, that God is there, that he loves you, and that he has never failed you. Right?

If you do not trust his love, if you have not experienced his mercy, and if you have not been captivated by his grace then don't move on to obedience because such obedience will be self-centered and short-lived.

Nearly every time, if not in fact every time, the New Testament calls us to obedience it is premised on us knowing and experiencing God's grace first.

Listen to the Apostle Paul say it in Romans 12:1 "Therefore, I urge you, brothers, **in view of God's mercy**, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God

Listen to Peter say it in 2 Peter 3:14 "So then, dear friends, **since you are looking forward to this**, make every effort..."

In the Bible, obedience **to** God is predicated on the grace **of** God.

Joshua recalls for his people the grace of God in their lives so that he might appeal to that grace in his call to obedience.

And from that platform he does in fact call them to obedience.

I think the word obedience has taken a "bad rap" in our culture. Obedience has become sterile duty rather than warm relationship.

But obedience to God is not about "doing it or else".

God is not a petulant, self-centered ruler, demanding obeisance.

He is a gracious father whose every command is for our good.

Obedience is about living in relationship with God, it is about response to grace – it is about a heartfelt desire to respond to my God's gracious will for my life.

If we don't understand that, we will never understand correctly the rest of what Joshua has to say.

II. So given the grace that they have experienced, what does Joshua call them to?

V6 "Be very strong; be careful to obey all that is written in the Book of the Law of Moses

V8 "You are to hold fast to the LORD your God, as you have until now.

V11 "So be very careful to love the LORD your God."

Notice he says to be "strong" and "careful."

- "Strong" has to do with being resolved and boldly determined.
- "Careful" has to do with being watchful, vigilant, and diligent – paying close attention.

But be "strong" and "careful" to do what?

To "obey", to "hold fast" and to "love" the Lord your God.

We've already seen that "obedience" is not cold duty but a warm responsiveness to God.

"Holding fast" has to do with clinging to God.

"Loving" certainly has to do with a heart-response.

Joshua calls us to live in relationship with God.

They and we are not called to a religion but a relationship.

Joshua doesn't want that relationship to wane – he wants them to be determined and careful to continually respond to God.

Joshua could have ended his remarks with that ringing affirmation of God's grace and his call to them to cling to God.

But he doesn't.

III. He adds a strong warning.

And it is the warning that bothers us evangelicals.

Here's the way Joshua says it:

Joshua 23:6-7 "obey...without turning aside to the right or to the left. Do not associate with these nations that remain among you; do not invoke the names of their gods or swear by them. You must not serve them or bow down to them."

Joshua 23:12-13 “But if you turn away 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 backs and thorns in your eyes, until you perish from this good land...”

Joshua 23:16 “If you violate the covenant of the LORD your God, which he commanded you, and go and serve other gods and bow down to them, the LORD's anger will burn against you, and you will quickly perish from the good land he has given you.”

We've come back to where I began the message.

We like Joshua's reminder of grace.

We even accept his call to a relationship of obedience to God.

But when he warns this way, some begin to think this is just Old Testament legalism and they reject it for New Testament grace.

That is dangerously wrong thinking.

Listen to God's word to us in the New Testament.

2 Peter 3:14-18 “So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him... Therefore, dear friends, since you already know this, be on your guard so that you may not be carried away by the error of lawless men and fall from your secure position.”

Hebrews 4:1 “Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it.”

1 Corinthians 10:11-12 The things that happened to the unfaithful Israelites were “examples and were written down as **warnings** for us,

on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come. So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!

Galatians 5:19-21 “The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. **I warn you**, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.”

Matthew 7:17-21 “Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit... Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them. Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.”

Shall I show you more or have I made the point that Joshua was not a legalist?

Joshua is warning in the same way that Jesus does.

True faith results in a believing-obedient-relationship with God or it is not true faith.

People were saved under the Old Covenant the same way people are saved under the New Covenant – by grace through faith in God’s provision.

In the Old Covenant God provided the sacrifices of bulls and goats that looked forward historically to His New Covenant provision of His own Son Jesus and his “Cross-Work” to which we look back historically.

For a believer in both Joshua’s day and in our day, believing-obedience was the appropriate response.

I say believing-obedience rather than belief and obedience because belief and obedience are two sides of the same coin.

James made it clear that faith without obedience is not faith.

And Paul makes it clear that obedience without faith is dead works.

Jesus' call was to follow him.

If people didn't follow him they weren't Christ-followers.

Jesus' call was to be his disciple.

If people didn't adhere to him and his teachings, they weren't his disciples.

Jesus' call was to believe him.

To believe him was not to simply believe he exists – for as James says it, the devils believe that.

Or as Jesus said it in John 8:31 “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples.

To believe him is to trust what he says. And trusting what he says is evidenced by our actions. If we don't act in trusting ways, it is obvious we don't trust him and hence we don't believe him.

You can say you trust a ladder but if when you need a ladder you won't climb on it, it is apparent that you don't really trust the ladder in spite of what you say.

We are saved by grace through faith but that salvation results in a changed life. No change, no salvation.

Joshua spoke to his people in the way that Jesus speaks to us in the New Testament.

God is gracious, we are blessed.

And our response is called for.

It isn't that we earn his favor by obeying and earn his disfavor by disobeying.

We already have his favor, he has gone before us, providing for us, fighting for us.

Now our response indicates our acceptance of that favor or our rejection of it.

If we accept his favor, if we are saved by his grace, then we will respond.

And even the response is by his grace, not works.

If we reject his favor, it will be evident in our response; we will not follow him or cling to him but will follow other gods.

J.C. Ryle wrote,

“I fear much for many professing Christians. I see no sign of fighting in them, much less of victory. They never strike one stroke on the side of Christ. They are at peace with His enemies. They have no quarrel with sin. I warn you, this is not Christianity. This is not the way to heaven...

“Young men and women, and especially you who have been brought up in religious families, I fear much for you. I fear lest you get a habit of giving way to every temptation. I fear lest you become afraid of saying ‘no’ to the world and the devil – and when sinners entice, you think it (easiest) to consent... Every concession will make you weaker.” (Ryle Holiness p237)

“Let me warn all of you who are living only for the world, to consider what you are doing.” You are enemies of Christ, though you may not know it. You are refusing to give him your heart.

Let me warn all formalists and self-righteous people to take heed that you are not deceived. You may do all religious practices dutifully but where is your repentance, your faith, evidences of a new heart, the work of the Spirit?

Let me warn all you careless members of the church to beware lest you trifle your soul into hell. You live on year after year as if there is no battle to be fought. You pass through life smiling as if there is not devil, no heaven, and no hell.

Let me warn you who want to be saved to not be content with the world’s standard of religion. The New Testament clearly shows that Christianity is far deeper and higher than the Christianity of most professing Christians. The formal, easy-going, do-little thing that most people call religion is not the religion of the Lord Jesus.” (Ryle Holiness p238-239)

Have I just denied “eternal security”.

Have I suggested we can’t be certain of our eternal destiny?

What I'm denying is a faith that is centered anywhere but in God.  
We don't put our faith in past experiences; we put it in God.

We don't trust that because we prayed a sinner's prayer  
sometime, we are certain of eternal life.

We don't trust that because we lead a decent life, we have a  
relationship with God.

We trust only in God – a living, present-day, active trust in  
him.

And that trust is evidenced by a believing-obedient-  
relationship with him.

If that believing-obedient-relationship doesn't exist then you have  
reason to doubt and fear.

Isn't that what Joshua is saying as well?

Joshua 23:12 "If you turn away and ally yourselves with the  
survivors of these nations that remain among you and if you  
intermarry with them and associate with them, **then**..."

Joshua 23:16 "If you violate the covenant of the LORD your  
God, which he commanded you, and go and serve other gods  
and bow down to them, **(then)**..."

So what do we do?

We trust God!

Here's the way the Bible says it:

1 Corinthians 16:13 "Stand firm in the faith; be men of courage; be  
strong.

Hebrews 3:14 "We have come to share in Christ if we hold  
firmly till the end the confidence we had at first.

1 Corinthians 15:2 "By this gospel you are saved, if you  
hold firmly to the word I preached to you."

"The New Testament (affirms) that nothing can separate us from the  
love of God and nobody can steal away the sheep of the good  
Shepherd. Those statements affirm that God does keep those who

trust in him. We do not need to fear in the midst of temptation, for we know that if we trust in God, his power will preserve us. This is not presumption but a confidence which is grounded in our experience of divine grace...When the believer puts his trust in God, he is entitled to be confident.” (I Howard Marshall Kept By the Power of God p205)

I am not asking if you have trusted him.  
I'm asking do you now trust him?

True faith in the living God is present tense, I am now believing him.  
I now have a relationship with him by his grace.  
I now respond to that grace and I pursue God with believing-obedience.

Are you pursuing God or do you rationalize that you have gone into spiritual neutral?  
Are you clinging or do you think you are coasting?  
I think the Bible declares we are either holding fast to God or we are turning away and allying ourselves with gods.

When Joshua finished his appeal what do you suppose he wanted his people to do?

I think of two things.  
He wanted some to repent.  
They had already begun turning their attention to themselves and away from the true God.

He prayed that the reminder of the grace of God would beckon them and the wrath of God would warn them.

He wanted others to renew their resolve to be strong, to be careful, to hold fast, to obey and to love the Lord their God.  
That they would not slip into neutral, would not develop an agnosticism but would cling to god and fight for their souls.

Which is it for you? Repentance or a new Resolve?