

Will You Serve the God Who Keeps His Promises?

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[0 : 00] Well, how about I pray, because I think I need it. I always do. Father, help us to receive your word. Help me to speak your word in a clear and persuasive way, so that they know it's coming from you. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Now, before I get into it, there's one notice that I want to draw your attention to in the pew sheets, and that's just the notice about the property update. There's going to be two open meetings, actually, on Tuesday night and Wednesday morning.

What's about is actually written in the notice itself. The church is about to do some property transactions, potentially. But if you have questions or you'd like more explanation on that, then please come along to those two meetings.

All right. Joshua chapter 23. Now, leadership transitions can be a tricky business, can't it? Just look at the U.S. presidency at the moment, where everyone's fretting over whether Donald Trump would transition or not.

Well, and even though Obama, President Obama, knowing how important it is, even though President Obama is disappointed with the outcome, he said that he'll do everything he can to make sure there's a smooth transition.

[1 : 20] He's even said of Donald Trump, we're now all rooting for his success. Of course, HCD is also going through our own transition, aren't we, as we wait and pray for the appointment of a new vicar.

Thankfully, I think our transition is much more uneventful. Andrew Reid has finished, and hopefully by God's grace, we're not going to get someone like Donald Trump. We're not going to get someone like Donald Trump.

But in our passage tonight, we find Joshua as Israel's leader, facing his own transition. The Bible, always speaking the truth in love, announces in verse 1 of chapter 23 that Joshua is very old.

In fact, it's rather more blunt in Hebrew. In the Hebrew, it literally says, Joshua is old and getting on in years. Not very PC, is it? But clearly, the message is that Joshua's time is nearly up.

His innings is coming to an end. It's time to hang up the bat. And so it's a sad moment. And yet, it's also a moment of rejoicing and thanksgiving. Because it gives testimony to Joshua's long and fateful service, leading God's people as God fulfills his plans for them.

[2 : 38] But unlike Moses, there's no successor to Joshua. He's actually handing over to a group of leaders. And so as part of this transition, Joshua gives these three speeches that we've got at the end of the book.

Each one is actually marked by Joshua summoning the people. Last week in chapter 22, only the eastern tribes were summoned. But here in chapters 23 and 24, Joshua summons all Israel.

Or more specifically, the leaders who are representing the people. And then the leaders will then take Joshua's words back to them. And because these are Joshua's final words, they are carefully chosen to convey what he thinks is of most importance to them.

So both speeches here have a similar message and theme. But they are also different in content and emphases. So let's look at the first one in chapter 23, where in your outline, Joshua tells them how God has been faithful to them, the first generation to inherit the land.

God always keeps his promises. And that's why Israel must serve the Lord. That's the point of the speech. Now here Joshua appeals to their very own experiences.

[3 : 59] You've seen it before. You've seen it yourself, Joshua says in verse 3. Everything the Lord your God has done to the nations for your sake. Remember how, he continues in verse 4, you've been allotted the very land that God promised you.

Yes, there are still enemies to be driven out. And no, I, Joshua, wouldn't be with you anymore. But you know what? But it was always God anyway. It was never me.

So verse 3, it is the Lord your God who fought for you. Verse 5, the Lord your God himself will push them out for your sake. Verse 9, the Lord has driven out before you great and powerful nations.

And verse 10, one of you routes a thousand because the Lord your God fights for you, just as he promised. And so Joshua is saying, you know all this already because you've seen it yourselves.

From the time Moses told you of God's promises, which I, Joshua, reminded you of when we entered the land, all the way until now, God has acted according to his promises.

[5 : 07] And so in verse 14, he goes on, 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. Joshua isn't saying anything here that they didn't already know. In fact, in their hearts of hearts, they know this because they've seen it.

Friends, one of the great things about being a Christian is that the longer we follow God consistently, the more we see and the more we remember. Every time we experience God's faithfulness, we're able to store it away.

Every time he helps us when we cry to him, or he provides for us when we trust in him, or he forgives us when we fail, we then have examples of God's faithfulness, which we can draw upon later in our Christian walk whenever we have challenges.

And that's why Joshua, having reminded them of God's faithfulness, now commands them to serve the Lord, to be faithful. So verse 6, Joshua says, be very careful, or be very strong and 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.

[6 : 24] 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.

This was the very command that was given in chapter 1, in verse 8. But then Joshua goes on and says, there's actually another aspect to this, for not only is serving God the right response to God's faithfulness, there is another side to God's faithfulness.

For the Lord keeps his promises not only to bless, but also to curse and punish. Now if you are a parent, you know that children always hang off your very promises.

Every time there's a promise of reward and treats, that is. So, like ice cream after dinner, or going to movie world for holidays this Christmas or whatever, they always want to make sure you keep them.

But not surprisingly, they are a little less keen when it comes to warnings and punishments. Girls, there will be punishment if you keep fighting like this. Don't see the girls hanging off those words.

[7 : 36] Girls, there will be no TV if you don't finish your homework. Don't see them insisting that I keep those promises. And yet, if parents are to be true to their word, if they are a people of integrity, then all the words matter, don't they?

And if that's so for parents, then how much more with God? And so, in verse 12, Joshua reminds them, but if you turn away and ally yourselves with the survivors of these nations and remain among them and intermarry with them and associate, then you may be sure, you may be sure that the Lord will no longer drive out these nations before you, but they will become snares and traps for you until you perish from this good land which the Lord has given you.

Now, again, this is nothing new. Moses has already given them these warnings. back in Numbers and Deuteronomy. But Joshua then reminds them in verse 15, but just as all the good things that the Lord has promised you have come to you, so in the same way He will bring on you all the evil things He has threatened until the Lord your God has destroyed you from this good land He has given you.

You see, God stands behind all His words both to bless and to curse. And He is a jealous God.

He's jealous for His people to stop worshipping idols which are worthless and powerless. But He stands behind every word that He says.

[9 : 07] Every promise, good and bad, will come to pass. Now, we've flown over it, but that's speech number two in Joshua chapter 23.

But let's turn now to the third and final speech, chapter 24. Now, here Joshua has a similar message, but this time, Joshua zooms out and shows not just God's faithfulness to this present generation, but to past generations as well.

You see, God's kindness to them has actually been going on for a long, long time. Longer than before they were born. God has been acting for them long before they conquered the land.

Now, in this speech, Joshua summons the leaders again, but this time, it's at Shechem. Remember Shechem? Remember that place? It's between Mount Ebal and Gerizim where they were shouting the blessings and curses in chapter 8.

And remember how this was also Abraham's, this is the first place where Abraham heard the promise of God in Genesis 15. So, this is a fitting place for Joshua to be recounting Israel's history, which now God goes through in verse 2.

[10 : 19] So, look with me verse 2 of chapter 24. This is what the Lord, the God of Israel says, Long ago your ancestors, including Terah, the father of Abraham, and Nahob, lived beyond the Euphrates and worshipped other gods.

That is, remember your forefathers were idol worshippers as well. Just like the people in this land. So, don't think too highly of yourselves. And yet, by His grace, God says, I took your father Abraham from the land beyond the Euphrates and led him through Canaan and gave him many descendants.

I gave him Isaac and to Isaac I gave Jacob and Esau. I assigned the hill country to Esau, but Jacob and his family went down to Egypt. Now again, Esau is mentioned here for a reason.

He's Jacob's elder brother and so by rights, he was the firstborn to whom the inheritance belonged. This should have been his land, the land of Canaan.

And yet, he didn't hold fast to the promise. But he gave it up cheaply to his brother, to Jacob. For how much? For a bowl of soup. A mere bowl of soup.

[11 : 27] So God says, remember Esau's fate and don't give up your inheritance cheaply by following other gods, worthless and powerless gods. Even though Esau did get some land down at Seir, it wasn't the land of promise.

God wasn't with him to fight for him. On the other hand, although Jacob and sons ended up in Egypt and dying without inheriting the land, yet God was with them for he came to bring them out of Egypt.

So Joshua continues in verse 5 then, I sent Moses and Aaron down to Egypt and I afflicted the Egyptians by what I did there and brought you out. When I brought your people out of Egypt, you came to the sea and the Egyptians pursued you as far as the Red Sea, but they cried to the Lord for help and he put darkness between you and the Egyptians.

He brought the sea over them and covered them. You saw with your own eyes what I did to the Egyptians. This then was a foretaste of what God would then do for them in the land of Canaan.

First, actually in the land east of the Jordan, of the promised land in verses 8 to 10, then in the land of Canaan itself in verses 11 to 13.

[12 : 46] And in that passage there, twice in verse 8 and 11, it records that God gave their enemies into their hands. And twice again in verse 10 and 13, Joshua says that the Lord blesses them without them having to do a single thing.

First, he turns Balaam's curses to blessing and then secondly, by giving them cities and vineyards which they didn't have to build or plant. And so Joshua is saying, if what God's done for the present generation, if what I've told you about in chapter 23 is not enough, it doesn't persuade you enough, then zoom out and look at the history.

Look at the history of what God has done for you up to now. God has been with you every step of the way, he says. They are exactly where they are now in the land of Canaan because God has been working for them from the very beginning.

He could have left Abraham as an idol worshipper beyond the Euphrates, but no, he called him out of idolatry. He could have chosen Esau instead of Jacob, but no, he chose the younger to receive the blessing.

He could have left them in Egypt under slavery, but no, again, he heard their cries. And he could have left them in the wilderness when they were disobedient, but no, he graciously led them out of the desert.

[14 : 09] And so, it's this series of gracious acts, one after another, that has led Israel to this point, to this point of them enjoying rest in the land. And so, in light of this, how are they to respond?

Well, the same way Joshua commanded them in the last chapter, verse 14. He says, Fear the Lord and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods of your ancestors and serve the Lord.

Friends, we can zoom out even more, can't we? Because God didn't stop acting for his people there. Once they were in the land, no, instead, as we see next, God raised up judges to rescue them from their idolatry and judges.

Then he raises up a king in David to rule over them justly and expand the kingdom. And then, when they still remained disobedient and worshipped other gods, he took them to exile, yes, but then he also brought them back.

All the way until God acts in his son Jesus, the promised Messiah. And it is he who defeats the greatest enemy of them all, that of sin and our rebellion against him.

[15 : 26] I don't know about you, but it's a real comfort, isn't it, to know that God has been acting for our good ever since the dawn of time. To know that he hasn't just been faithful while you've been a Christian or even while you've been on this earth.

No, God has been faithful from eternity to eternity for us, for each and every one of us. Now, even in my own life and history, I can testify to that, of how God has acted long before I was even born.

For you see, he was the one who sent the British to Southeast Asia, to places like Singapore, so that when he brought my grandparents out from China, my parents learned English in Singapore.

So that way, God then sent missionaries to Singapore. They were ready to hear the gospel because they understood English. And so as a result, they became parents, Christians, and I could then be raised in a family that already knew Jesus.

God has been working for me even before I was born, since 1823, when Sir Stanford Raffles stepped foot into Singapore. I know my history, I know my dates.

[16 : 44] Now you could call all this coincidence, of course, and you can look at all these things as random, or you can look at it through the eyes of faith and see God's hand in all of it.

And there's nothing special about me. I'm sure that all of you would have the same sorts of stories to tell. Just the fact that you're here today and you're hearing the gospel, that's not an accident.

Just the fact that you're here and you've believed the gospel, that's not an accident. And so, it can be bewildering sometimes to look at the world and try and understand what's going on with all these world events, but if you look at the world's events through the eyes of faith, then what you see is a golden thread running right through it.

It's what we call salvation history. And the Bible records for us these truly history-making events in which God acts to save his people and then when we come to Jesus to be saved, we're part of that salvation history as well.

We get to be a tiny piece of this golden thread. So, it's clear that we respond to God's faithfulness then by fearing and serving him with all faithfulness.

[18 : 03] We learn that from both stories. from both speeches. But I guess in our final point, what I want to look at is what does this look like in practice? What do we do when we say we want to serve the Lord with all our heart?

Well, I think in the final verses of this book, we find three things to help us. So first, in verses 15 to 21, we need to choose and commit. No one stumbles into serving the Lord.

No one stumbles into serving the Lord. You don't do it just because your friends are or because your parents are. No, each of us have to choose whether we want to serve the Lord or not.

And when we've done that, we need to commit to it by living according to it. So you see Joshua's challenge there in verse 15. But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves whom you will serve, whether the gods of your ancestors or the gods of the Amorites in whose lands you are living.

But as far as me and myself, as for me and myself, my household, we will serve the Lord. And just like Jesus did with Peter after the resurrection, remember how Jesus at the lake asked Peter three times, do you love me?

[19 : 15] Joshua 2 asked the people three times, will you serve the Lord? In fact, in verse 19, he goes as far as to say, are you sure you really want to serve the Lord because you will fail at it.

No one, you will not serve the Lord. Are you still going to do it? And each time, good on them, the answer comes back, no, we too will serve the Lord because He is our God.

Each time, they commit and say, yes, we will serve the Lord because of what we have seen the Lord done. Well, brothers and sisters, what about us? What is our choice today?

Will we choose to serve the Lord too? Wholeheartedly instead of halfheartedly? You see, there's really no other way to serve the Lord. You can't serve the Lord wholeheartedly.

I hope you realize that. Paul, in our second reading tonight, I put the verse back up on the screen. He says that we are to offer our bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to Him.

[20 : 14] That is, sacrificial living is the only way to please God. Serving Him requires us to live sacrificially, giving our bodies, what it means is, all our lives.

And so, for instance, you can't choose to serve God on Sunday and then choose the God of ambition or greed at work on Monday. You can't just serve God when exams are over but live for the God of academic success at term time.

No, if we choose to serve the Lord, then as Joshua shows in verse 23, we have to throw away the foreign gods or the idols. We have to throw away the gods. Our hearts cannot be captured by all these other gods, by selfish desires, goals and ambitions.

No, we are to yield our hearts fully to the Lord. That is what commitment looks like. And then secondly, because they have to do it for their entire lives and we have to do it for our entire lives and from generation to generation, Joshua then gives them both word and witness to help them to stick to it.

So, if you look with me in verse 25 to 27, Joshua gives them God's word, firstly, all the laws, he says, and decrees are written down, even his speech, I think, and their response to it.

[21 : 37] All are written in the book of the law of God. And then in verse 26, he adds a witness in the form of a large stone under the oak tree near the holy place.

This will be a witness, Joshua says, to remind them of their response to hearing God's word. They themselves said that they will serve the Lord and this stone here, that will remind them, that will stand as a, they will speak, it will speak as a witness against them should they fail to live up to it.

And so, friends, we are similarly given word and witness in our lives. As we gather each week, we remind ourselves of God's word.

And then, in our responses, we bear witness to each other of our commitment to it, to serve the Lord. That's what we're doing when we gather. Not the only thing we do, but a large part of it is listening God's word and saying, yes, we will continue to serve God.

Yes, we are committed to serving Him. So, you see, coming to church, it doesn't mean that it has to be all excitement every week. That somehow you need to have an emotionally charged service or God is not with us or, you know, you have to have some amazing revelation from God every time you come to church.

[22 : 55] No, sometimes it simply means being reminded of what you've already heard. but it's still important for us to come each week because we need to have that constant reminder of God's promises and then we need to be in the practice or habit of responding in commitment again to Him.

We need to hear it and then we need to respond because we need this fresh reminder as we then head out back into the week to serve the Lord. When we do that, then we will remember that we've promised to make choices to serve the Lord and not to serve the other gods that surround us in our world.

So let me encourage you. Come. And when you leave and it's like, oh, yeah, heard it all before, don't say that because what you're doing is you're simply being reminded of God's promises and you're committing to it.

Now, of course, sometimes you will hear something great, sometimes you're in need and the Lord will touch you. but church is not, we're not here for the big performance every week where we need to be on a big high or whatever.

That's not the sign of the Spirit. The sign of the Spirit is when the Word is being spoken to remind us to serve the Lord. Finally, as we come to the last verses, we find a third thing to help us serve the Lord and that is the hope of rest and reward.

[24 : 21] Now, on the surface, verses 28 to 33, this seems like a bunch of factual details, right? People died, they got buried. So Joshua, the leader, he dies at 110 and Eliza, the high priest at the time, he dies and is buried.

And we even have an account of the return of Joshua's bones to Shechem. But there is one detail that ties all these three events together. I wonder whether you've noticed it.

We are told that each is buried in the land of their inheritance. or in the case of Eliza, because he doesn't have land, what is allotted to him. The tribe of Levi doesn't have their own area of land.

In other words, each of them found their resting place as promised by God. That is the message we are to take from these last few verses. This is the just reward for each of them for serving the Lord faithfully to the end.

Now, I don't know if you've ever been on a long flight, but often, especially when you take that long flight from perhaps Sydney to LA, you find yourself wondering how long more there is to go.

[25 : 35] And often, I would flick to the screen, you know, that flight path screen, like I've got a picture of it there. And when it's close up, it seems so discouraging, doesn't it? You see so much ocean still and you go, oh, another two hours or whatever.

But then, the map zooms out and it's actually very encouraging, isn't it? Because you see actually how far you've traveled and how close actually you are to that destination.

Well, the same is true with the Christian walk. Sometimes we look at our lives and many of you are much younger than I am, so you think that the road ahead seems long. There are still so many more years to go.

Will we be able to serve the Lord faithfully, you might think? But then when you read God's word and when you're reminded that God has actually been faithful for such a long, long time, ever since time began, and what's more, the great salvation event of Jesus dying and rising to life has already occurred, then we get the sense that actually we're nearly there.

We need only to serve Him faithfully for a little while more. true, it still may be decades, but our faithfulness is nothing compared to the faithfulness of God over this long, long, long, long stretch of time.

[26 : 59] So friends, given how close we are to this rest, let me encourage you to choose to fear the Lord, commit to serving Him faithfully. God has always kept His promises and He will keep them to the end.

We are nearly there, brothers and sisters. Let us press on to the end. Let's pray. Father, we thank You that You've been, You're not a God that's created this world and then stepped back and then let it run, but know, Lord, that You have, You have been active in its history, You've been active in everything that has been happening in this world, and not only that, You'll not only be active, You've actually come into this world through Your Son, Jesus, to make history, to make salvation history.

And so, in light of Your faithfulness, help us to fear You and to serve You with all faithfulness in response. Give us the strength, give us the courage to keep going until we see Jesus again.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.