

Called to be Faithful

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[0 : 0 0] We're going to turn now to our reading for this morning, and both morning and evening we're going to be in the last couple of chapters of the book of Joshua. And if you have one of our church Bibles, that I think is page 198.

And we're going to read this morning Joshua chapter 23, the second last chapter, at the end of this exciting book, which tells of the story of Israel having been rescued out of Egypt, having spent 40 years wandering in the wilderness, at last taking possession of the promised land under the leadership of Joshua.

And now we come to the end of Joshua's own life and his words to the leaders and to the people of Israel. So Joshua chapter 23 and verse 1.

A long time afterward, when the Lord had given rest to Israel from all their surrounding enemies, and Joshua was old and well advanced in years, Joshua summoned all Israel, its elders and heads, its judges and officers, and said to them, I am now old and well advanced in years.

And you have seen all that the Lord your God has done to all these nations for your sake. For it is the Lord your God who has fought for you. Behold, I have allotted to you as an inheritance for your tribes those nations that remain, along with all the nations that I have already cut off from the Jordan to the great sea in the west.

[1 : 3 8] The Lord your God will push them back before you and drive them out of your sight, and you shall possess their land just as the Lord your God promised you. Therefore, be very strong to keep and do all that is written in the book of the law of Moses, turning aside from it neither to the right hand nor to the left, that you may not mix with these nations remaining among you, or make mention of the names of their gods, or swear by them, or serve them, or bow down to them, but you shall cling to the Lord your God, just as you have done to this day.

For the Lord has driven out before you great and strong nations. And as for you, no man has been able to stand before you to this day. One man of you puts to flight a thousand, since it is the Lord your God who fights for you, just as he promised you.

Be very careful, therefore, to love the Lord your God. For if you turn back and cling to the remnant of these nations remaining among you, and make marriages with them, so that you associate with them and they with you, know for certain that the Lord your God will no longer drive out these nations before you.

But there shall be a snare and a trap for you, a whip for your sides and thorns in your eyes, until you perish from off this good ground that the Lord your God has given you.

And now, I am about to go the way of all the earth. And you know in your hearts and souls, all of you, that not one word has failed of all the good things that the Lord your God promised concerning you.

[3 : 2 8] All have come to pass for you. Not one of them has failed. But just as all the good things that the Lord your God promised concerning you have been fulfilled for you, so the Lord will bring upon you all the evil things until he has destroyed you from off this land that the Lord your God has given you.

If you transgress the covenant of the Lord your God, which he has commanded you, if you go and serve other gods and bow down to them, then the anger of the Lord will be kindled against you, and you shall perish quickly from off the good land that he has given to you.

Amen. And may God bless to us this, his word. Amen. Well, thank you so much for your warm welcome this morning.

It's a great joy to be back here with you and to share this Sunday together. And I know I would bring the greetings of many friends in London who pray with you and for you. And as we share together in the work of the gospel in these days, We rejoice in all that the Lord is doing through the fellowship here and all that he is yet to do as you move forward with him.

I thought it would be good to take these last two chapters of the book of Joshua as our study passages for today. This morning called to be faithful and this evening called to be servants.

[5 : 05] So if you'd like to turn in the Bible to Joshua chapter 23, this is the passage that we'll be looking at. And as we open our Bibles, let's ask the Lord to help us understand.

Our Father, we take your word into our hands with great rejoicing. Thank you that you have spoken to us in words that are living and enduring. And we pray now that you will take our lives into your hands and that you will open them so that we may meet with you, the living God, in the pages of scripture and in our minds and hearts through the gracious ministry of your spirit.

So help us to understand your truth and hearing it to receive it and by your grace to put it into practice in our lives through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Amen. Famous last words have become something of an institution. Sometimes they have a tragic humor about them, such as the famous last words of General John Sedgwick, who was a Union commander during the U.S. Civil War, killed in battle in 1864.

His famous last words were, no, they couldn't hit an elephant at that distance. He proved that they could, in fact, hit him and he sadly died.

[6 : 28] Or what about the disparaging last words of Karl Marx, who told his housekeeper, who was apparently hovering at his bed to write down the last words of wisdom for posterity?

They were, she said, last words are for fools who haven't said enough. But the last words or the farewell speeches of the Bible have much more serious content and far deeper significance.

You think of the final speeches of Jacob as he blessed his 12 sons or of Moses as he prepared the Israelites for the promised land in those famous speeches in Deuteronomy.

Or the great King David in his farewell speech. And supremely, the Lord Jesus himself, of course, in John chapter 13 to 17, what we call the upper room discourse.

They are his last words to his disciples before the betrayal and the cross. And here at the end of this book of Joshua, we have Joshua's parting discourses.

[7 : 32] There are actually three of them in 22, 23 and 24. In chapter 22, he says farewell to the two and a half tribes who are returning east over the Jordan to settle their allotted territories.

Here in chapter 23, he addresses the elders and the leaders of the nation. And then in chapter 24, we shall see this evening his final charge to the nation as a whole in an address which culminates in that great challenge.

Choose whom you will serve and the renewal of their covenant commitment to the Lord. But today's chapter 23 addressed to the elders of Israel and through them, of course, to the whole nation is a less formal address.

It's very pastoral. It seeks to alert the leaders and bring them on side with its reminders from the past, which are intended to issue a wise and godly orientation towards the future.

And that's something we all need as we go on serving the Lord day by day. First one sets the scene. The long time refers to the period of the conquest, the story of this book of Joshua from the crossing of the River Jordan to the allocation of the tribal and family inheritances.

[8 : 57] And chapter 24 and verse 29 tells us that Joshua was 110 years old when he died. So he's probably referring to a period of 25 to 30 years since Israel first set foot in the land and set up the 12 memorial stones from the River Jordan at Gilgal, which marked their entry into Israel.

And that land, then the land of the Canaanites, but always the land of God that he had promised to give to his people, is now under their control. We are reminded at the beginning of the chapter, verse 1, that the Lord has given rest from all their enemies, and the land now has rest from war, just as he had promised.

And Joshua is conscious that there are many dangers associated with the peace, and that the future will bring more, perhaps even greater tests than the past.

He is near the end of his life, as he says in these opening verses. So he's concerned to pass on the battle, and to do it well by showing how God purposes his people to live in the coming days.

Now in this chapter, there is a structure which is helpful, I think, for giving us a little bit of a map. The chapter divides into three sections after the introduction.

[10 : 24] Verses 3 to 8, verses 9 to 13, and verses 14 to 16. And like many a good preacher, after him, Joshua repeats his big idea in each of these three paragraphs.

So it's a three-pointer sermon, if you like, and there's a theme that runs through that is the big idea. Not a bad model for a preacher. And at the beginning, he focuses them back in thanksgiving and appreciation of what God has done.

But as the speech continues, Joshua's apprehension about the future becomes more and more dominant. And so as the sermon goes on, there are increasingly strong warnings about the dangers that they will face in the future.

And I want us to look at this Old Testament preachers theological perspective, thematically, as he does, in three points, so that we can see more clearly its lessons for us today.

So will you notice with me, firstly, a section which I want to call What You Have Seen. What You Have Seen. Look at verse 2.

[11 : 36] Joshua summoned all Israel, the elders and heads, the judges and officials, and said to them, As for me, I am old, literally, well advanced in years. As for you, you have seen all that the Lord, your God, has done.

What you have seen. Now it's not surprising that at the end of his long and eventful life, Joshua begins by looking back, but you'll see that it's not in nostalgia, it's not in self-indulgence.

Verse 3 shows that this is for the benefit of his hearers. As for me, well I'm an old man and I'm at the end of my road, he says, but as for you, who are going to continue in the land when I have gone, I want to say to you, keep looking back at what God has done for you, what you have seen.

And as he calls upon the leaders to review their common experience of God's goodness and to remember what God has already done for them, the immense changes that they have witnessed and that they daily benefit from, this is his instinct that by looking back they will find focus and faith for the future.

Now of course, that's a very sound spiritual instinct, isn't it? It's a principle of our own Christian lives. If we want to be healthy Christians, then we need to spend time looking back on what God has done.

[13 : 08] On what he has done in his great big picture purposes of salvation, yes, in what he has done in us as a congregation, yes, and in what he has done in your life as an individual.

What you have seen God do. Remember the psalmist says in Psalm 103, bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits.

Why does he say that? Because he knows that we will very quickly forget them. That we don't rehearse the goodness of God as much as we ought to. And that actually, thanksgiving, looking back and being conscious of what God has done, is the way in which our faith and our dependence upon God is strengthened and increased.

In fact, our relationship with God finds its vitality in this spiritual discipline of giving thanks. And as you read the New Testament, you will find that the apostles constantly are saying, be thankful, be thankful.

I thank my God for this. I praise him for that. Because you see, if you are a thankful Christian, it will focus you on God rather than on yourself and the world around you.

[14 : 25] And so, as he says, you have seen these things, he's reminding them of that relationship with God which the Lord has established with them and it's generating faith for the future.

John Newton in his great hymn says, his love in times past forbids me to think he'll leave me at last in trouble to sink. Each sweet Ebenezer, that's the stone that they put up that said, hitherto the Lord has helped us.

Each time I look back says Newton and see that the Lord has helped me, each sweet Ebenezer I have in review confirms his good promise to see me right through.

Now you need to cultivate that sort of thanksgiving if you're going to be a healthy Christian. We look back and we see that all the blessings we now enjoy have been God's gracious gift and that makes us realize one, how dependent we are on him two, how much we can rejoice because he's not going to change.

He's never going to let us go. He will not let us down. So here's the first sound instinct. If we're going to be called to be faithful we need to be looking back with thanksgiving and praise for everything that God has given to us.

[15 : 43] Now this of course is in fulfillment of what God promised. If you flip back with me just for a moment to the beginning of the book let's remind ourselves of what God said to Joshua at the start of this great enterprise which now they're reviewing.

Chapter 1 verse 7 God says only be strong and very courageous being careful to do according to all the law that Moses my servant commanded you don't turn from it to the right hand or to the left that you may have good success wherever you go.

this book of the law shall not depart from your mouth but you shall meditate on it day and night so that you may be careful to do according to all that's written in it for then you will make your way prosperous and then you will have good success haven't I commanded you be strong and courageous don't be frightened don't be dismayed for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.

Now that is the story of the book Joshua did put that law of God at the very center of his own life he is obedient to it he prompts the people and instructs them not to turn to the right or to the left and now they look back and they see what God has done because they were guided by the word that God had given through Moses and because the leadership kept them to that word and said we must not take a step either to the right or the left Israel experienced all God's faithfulness in the giving of the land of course there were times when it didn't work properly there was the time at Ai when there was sin in the camp and they experienced a great reversal they were deceived by the Gibeonites in chapter 9 it wasn't all a smooth progress without difficulty but again and again this book shows us that God has granted Israel this victory as they have committed themselves to his word and already now the land has been divided up and it's been allotted to the tribes and to the family groups parts of it have not yet been conquered but it's all there waiting for them if they will trust

God to experience this and to look to him for his help now in the context here Joshua also draws special attention to what he calls the nations for example verse 3 you have seen all that the Lord your God has done to all these nations for your sake and that terminology occurs seven times in the chapter the nations is a sort of technical term for those who are outside of God's covenant with Israel that is all the Canaanite peoples who are being conquered now because of their opposition to God's purposes for Israel they have fought tooth and nail against the conquest but verse 4 tells us that the Lord has already cut some of those peoples off and that there are others who will be subject to his authority in the future verse 5 the Lord will push them back before you and drive them out of your sight and you shall possess the land just as the Lord your God promised you so here again we see looking back in order to take strength and courage for the present and that looking back is a tremendous stimulus to go on believing that the

[19:16] God who started and sustained his purposes for Israel that he promised to Abraham way back is going to bring them to completion if they will keep trusting him so what you have seen teaches you says Joshua that there is no shortage of ability with God he is the Lord your God and you know whenever you come across the Lord in capital letters like that in the Old Testament it's the name Yahweh or Jehovah it's the name that is built on the Hebrew verb to be I am who I am why did God call himself that to show us that he is always the same and unchanging that he is always dependable that he is never less than he is at this moment and never has been he is utterly God God unchanging the great I am the one whose promises are not only made but fulfilled because he is the God of limitless power as well as measureless grace and whenever you read the word

Lord like that in the Old Testament we need to think about the covenant mercies of God that he's committed to us by promises that he will never break now says Joshua look at what the Lord has done for you and take heart because he's going to continue doing that for you as the sermon develops the theme is expanded a little more we won't look at it in detail but let me just take you to verse 10 which encapsulates it for us one man of you puts to flight a thousand since it is the Lord your God who fights for you just as he promised you that says it all doesn't it Israel is a thousand times stronger than the opposition but for only one reason the promise keeping God of limitless power is fighting for them and as the apostle Paul says if God be for us who can be against us as soon as the Lord takes the field the outcome is beyond question now it's not just his power though that Joshua reminds them of do you notice verse 10 at the end of the verse it's his promises you will believe in his power when you take his promises and claim them and the power is of course promised and the power is demonstrated by the fulfillment of the promise to do all that he has said he will do for them verse 14 in the last section encapsulates that brilliantly when it says you know in your hearts and souls that is deep in your innermost being all of you that not one word has failed of all the good things that the Lord your God promised concerning you all have come to pass for you not one of them has failed so here's a healthy spiritual discipline for them and for us we look back and we see what

God has done and from that we realize that he is utterly dependable that Joshua's brief review of the last 25 30 years proves over and over again as they consider what they have seen that yes God is faithful not one of his words has fallen to the ground not one of his promises has been unfulfilled and that of course is motivational to life now and life in the unknown future faithfulness of God is a matter of holding on to the God who is faithful that's what we're called to do to realize that everything that we have is because of him if you think about your own life the blessing of your conversion the knowledge of sins forgiven the growing deliverance from the world and the flesh and the devil our growth in grace and godliness of character how do those things happen well they are all testimony to the rich resources of God's covenant commitment to us his people but they also teach us that we need to be faithful to him we don't have to generate a faith within us to carry us through we have to hold on to the God who is faithful and trust him to carry us through

I take my little grandson on the beach in the summer I may say to him hold grandpa's hand and I want him to do that and I want him to learn to trust and I want him to be obedient of course and I know that there are all sorts of attractions on the beach and he could easily run away and get lost so I say hold my hand and he holds on but I'm holding his hand a hundred times more firmly than he's holding mine his little hand will slip out of mine very easily but I'm not going to let that hand go I'm going to hold on to that hand I'm going to keep him safe and God says to us trust me have faith in me put your hand in my hand and sometimes our hands are like the little grandson's hand they just slip out of God's hand so easily but he won't let you go he has you in his grip you've seen what he's done and that is the motivation to a faith that is growing an embracing of God's will and God's purpose for our lives that is enthusiastic and positive because none of us is secure if we are not daily dependent on the mercy and grace of God well that's

Joshua's first focus what you have seen and as you look at your life today and you think I'm not what I ought to be as John Newton used to say but I'm not what I once was and I'm it's by the grace of God that I am what I am so you look back on your life today rejoice give thanks to God and let it be a motivation to trust him more because he's never let you down to obey him more because his purposes and promises are secure now that leads to the second point what you've seen what you must understand come back with me to verse seven that you may not mix with these nations remaining among you or make mention of the names of their gods or swear by them or serve them or bow down to them here is the danger see Joshua sees not only the blessings of the past but the dangers of the present and he says the danger is compromise a good proportion of the land has been taken but there's very much more still to be possessed and if that's going to happen it will require razor sharp clarity and renewed energy if they are going to pursue

[26 : 39] God's purposes for them God fights for his people when his people are dependent on him and obedient to him so what they've learned is that all the energy and dynamic for victory belong to the Lord but they are available only when his people fight the good fight and here's the danger that they and we settle for a comfortable level of compromise that doesn't require that discipline or sacrifice or commitment on an ongoing basis and then the process of verse 7 takes over because the nations are always around the world and the flesh and the devil are always active in seeking to tempt us away from God they will always predispose our hearts to idolatry to worshipping the gods of the nations who are so much more accessible and apparently so much more easily influenced and much less demanding than the god of truth and righteousness but remember that the gods of the nations are lumps of wooden stone remember that they are lifeless artifacts that they have no life in them now this is an ongoing temptation for us as the people of

God because our default position is always idolatry we want to worship ourselves that's what a fallen human nature is all about I put me at the center of the world and I want everything to revolve around me in the way that I want it to that is idolatry it will express itself in all sorts of ways of course and we'll all have different idol shrines tucked away in the recesses of our minds and hearts that we're tempted to go back to and compromise our loyalty to the living God but if what you have seen is reality then you must understand says Joshua that there can be no compromise there is one God and one God alone and that as his people you must be dedicated to him on a continuing basis not just on a one off not just on a first occasion but as the very fabric of your lives for example look at verse 12 if you turn back and cling to the remnant of these nations remaining among you and make marriages with them so that you associate with them and they with you if in other words you're not a distinct people worshipping the Lord alone then know for certain that the

Lord your God will no longer drive them out all that could be yours Israel he says will not be if you are not devoted to the Lord your God and the expanded explanation at the end of the chapter is a chilling reminder of that in verses 15 and 16 indeed that was ultimately fulfilled of course later in Old Testament history in the exile to Babylon when Israel for 70 years was out of the land because the land belonged to God and it's his to take away just as much as it is his to give there really were and are only two ways to live and while God is infinitely patient and gracious in his dealings with rebellious people his judgment must ultimately fall and indeed it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God for our God is a consuming fire and Joshua wants the next generation to be in no doubt about the seriousness of the issue he's calling them not to compromise not to become complacent about the battle that's joined between truth and falsehood between the living God and the gods of the

Canaanites who are no gods at all and we would be very foolish if we thought that we were immune from such battles no he says you must understand this church life family life individual life they are always contacts aren't they a context I should say of the daily battles that we face when you go into the workplace tomorrow morning at the school gate in university lecture in the shopping mall wherever we are whatever we're doing there is always this battle that is there against the world and the flesh and the devil and because in the hidden depths of our own hearts there is this traitor self that wants to be indulged and wants to be at the centre of everything we need to remember what God has done for us and we need to focus on what we must understand about that battle that is coming so that we do not just slip into living the way in which our culture lives assuming the values of our culture and trying to marry them with our

Christian faith we've got to live in the world but we need to live in this world as distinctive members of God's kingdom and the same thing is true of us as a church as congregations as the people of God in our land in this generation it's very easy isn't it for churches to slip into a worldly methodology to look for strength in numbers and influence and resources without realising that the value of God's eternal kingdom is that when I am weak then I am strong that the badge of our conquering king is his crucifixion that it is Jesus on the cross that is the mark of Christian faith and that it is as we are crucified with Christ as we die daily that we enter into the experience of all the resources of the resurrected Christ who comes to us the other side of the cross to give us his life giving power through his spirit to transform us so he says to them think back on what you've seen think about what you must understand in the present and lastly think about how you must live as you go forward let me mention to you three things which come from the passage just three short things to encourage and focus us he reminds them in verse six that they must be very strong to keep and do all that is written in the book of the law of Moses that's the repetition of chapter one the whole book is saying the Bible is God's perfect revelation of his holy will and as you are careful as you make it your soul's purpose and delight to be obedient to the will of the Lord in scripture then you will experience all the blessings that God pours upon you not that you earn them by your obedience but that the grace that comes to us in covenant mercy is able to flow into our lives because obedience keeps that channel open by which there is no barrier between us and God but God can pour his grace and mercy into us so if this morning I'm conscious that in some way in my life

[34 : 08] I'm turning to the right hand or the left and that there's something that the Lord has said to me through his word and well I haven't really wanted to receive it and I don't really want to put it into practice well then it would be a great thing today to come back to God and to repent of that and to ask him in his mercy to give us grace to be obedient to what he's shown us but then the second thing he says in verse eight is this you shall cling to the Lord your God just as you have done to this day and cling there is a very strong verb it's the verb really which we would use as a sort of a verb for glue you must be glued to the Lord your God it's the verb that's used about marriage in Genesis when the two become one flesh it speaks of total commitment loyal devotion deep affection it's used of soldering two pieces of metal together so that they are inseparable that is what he says you must be like as the people of God cling to the

Lord your God be soldered to him be united to him in a way that cannot be broken God will be united to us like that but we have to respond in active faith to him in order that that may be worked out in our lives and that makes the repetition of the verb cling in verse 12 very challenging indeed because you see in verse 12 he says if you turn back and cling to the remnant of these nations remaining among you so you see what he's saying to them whom are you going to cling to who are you stuck to the Lord your God or the remnants of the nations the Canaanite ideas the Canaanite idols the Canaanite culture which way are you going to go in the future you've experienced so much in the past how can you not cling to the Lord your

God but there's one more verb with which we end and that's in verse 11 be very careful therefore to love the Lord your God how us we live in obedience to his word yes by clinging to him holding on to the God who is faithful seeking to fulfill all that he asks us to do but above all to love the Lord your God notice that it's not done on the back stroke be very careful there is nothing automatic about this it's highly intentional be very careful give your attention to this make it the heartbeat of your Christian life to love the Lord your God we know elsewhere in the Old Testament and endorsed by the Lord Jesus that that will take everything we have love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength it's the first and greatest commandment and the second is like it love your neighbor as yourself on these hang all the law and the prophets this is the heart of our faith this is the heart of our relationship with God he calls us to love him and for us that love is of course the response to his love for us because for us the love of

God is focused in the Lord Jesus Christ the son of God who loved me and gave himself for me he conquered all our enemies sin and death and the devil and when he fought for us and achieved our salvation on the cross of Calvary he opened the kingdom of heaven to all who believe in him we love him because he first loved us and so whenever I come across this sort of instruction in scripture be very careful to love the Lord your God I don't go looking inside myself for some sort of warm feeling that I can generate I look up and see what he has done for me in first loving me in winning that victory just as Joshua won those victories for Israel so Joshua is appointed to the ultimate Jesus the ultimate savior and our confidence then is not in our record but in his record all this is what it means to love the

Lord our God to take our stand for him to obey his word to recognize that we are citizens of a heavenly country that here we have no continuing city to know that we have ceased from our own works trying to justify ourselves and make ourselves acceptable to God and we have entered into the rest which God provided us through his son it's entirely relational it's all about loving God in the way in which he has first loved us so it's a healthy spiritual check up isn't it called to be faithful called to hold on to a faithful God take time to look back think on what you've seen and let that motivate you to think about what you must now do how you must now live and let's ask God to write afresh in our minds and hearts these determinations as we go out to serve him this week let's pray that each day we will consciously hear him speak in his word and seek to obey devote ourselves to clinging to God so that nothing comes between us and him and above all let's seek to live our lives in a way that shows that we love him imperfectly often failing constantly coming back to the cross but seeking to be the people he intends us to be let's pray together thank you our gracious

[40 : 28] Lord for this wonderful address which Joshua gave and for recording it through the ministry of your spirit in the inspiration of scripture and though we are so many centuries later and in such a different context our hearts resonate with these calls of your servant to the things that matter most so please help us to look back with great thanksgiving personally congregationally and as we review your gracious purposes down through history especially culminating in Jesus make us thankful rejoicing grateful people we pray teach us what we should understand from that about the dangers of complacency and compromise but above all Lord we pray that you will settle our hearts to obey you because we cling to you because we love you and please will you make us people who reflect your glory and who fulfill your perfect plan through

Jesus Christ our Lord we pray Amen