

Living Faithfully in an Unfaithful World

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[0:00] But we're going to turn now to our Bible readings this morning. And if you don't have a Bible with you, if you need a Bible, there's some red Bibles at the sides, at the back, at the front. Do pick one up. You'll be able to follow along.

We're reading together in the Old Testament in the book of Joshua. Near the end, chapter 23. And in those visitors' Bibles, I think it's page 197.

And we're going to read together the whole of Joshua, chapter 23. We're in these final chapters of the book when the land has been conquered, when it's been apportioned.

And Joshua is speaking to all the people, gathering them together several times and giving them words about the future.

And so we begin at 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 officials.

[1:12] And he 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's 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've already cut off from the Jordan to the Great Sea in the West.

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 to 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 the 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's the Lord your God who fights for you, just as he promised you.

[2:35] 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 on 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.

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 good land that the Lord your God has given you.

If you transgress the covenant of the Lord your God, which he has commanded you, and 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. Amen. And may God bless to us his word. Well, good morning, folks, and please have Joshua 23 open in front of you.

[4:32] It would be a great help to be able to refer to that as we spend a few moments thinking about this chapter. Now, I wonder, do you ponder, am I going to make it in the long haul as a Christian?

Will I keep going in the years and decades to come? Will I make it in the long haul? Perhaps you're a student here this morning and you're loving the fellowship of many other folk of a similar age and stage in life.

You're enjoying Release the Word. But you know there's a day coming when you'll graduate.

Maybe you'll move away from Glasgow, from that network of friends, from the church fellowship.

How will you keep going in the long haul? Maybe you're in the first decade or two of life post-university. You've left home. Pressures in the workplace.

Pressures at home. Perhaps aging parents to care for as well. It feels like getting through the week is a major achievement in itself. Will I really be able to keep going for another two, three decades?

[5:52] Or maybe you're in the winter of life. You look back on decades of faithful working with the Lord. You can see back and see the ups and downs over the years.

You worry about the future of the church in this land. What will you pass on to the next generation?

What words do you have for the younger men and women in the church?

What will you say to them? How will you encourage them to keep going in the decades ahead?

Well, it's faithfulness in the long run that is very much in Joshua's mind here.

That's at the very heart of his concern as he gathers the people, as he addresses the people again.

At the end of his own life, he's at this stage a pretty old man, approaching maybe 100 years old.

And he is consumed, isn't he? He's consumed with concern for the future. He's worried about God's people in the long term. And in this regard, he's an excellent example to us, isn't he?

[7:03] You get no hint, do you, of navel-gazing in his old age. He's not looking back on the path with regret. Not at all. He's looking to the future in hope.

He's living faithfully and with zeal for God's glory. That's his concern. He's worried about the coming generations of God's people. That's his concern. He's a man of faith, isn't he?

And because he's a man of faith, his concern is with the future. He's looking forward, isn't he? And as those who share his faith, we too ought to be consumed with the future, to be looking forward in hope.

This is the second of the great gatherings at the end of the book of Joshua. At the end of his life, he has these three great gatherings. We saw the first one last week. This is the second. Look at verse 2 of our chapter.

Joshua summoned all Israel. Its elders, its heads, its judges, officials. He's gathered the leaders of the people. Yes, as we've seen, the conquest has been successful.

[8:08] Yes, the people have demonstrated faithfulness over the years. But Joshua's concern now reaches beyond the immediate horizon and he's looking ahead to the future.

He's concerned about what may come. Look at verse 7. Just glance down there. His concern is that his people would not mix with the nations. They would not make mention of the names of their gods or swear by them or serve them or bow down to them.

But rather, verse 8, that they cling to the Lord. He is concerned that these nations, the nations they've been driving out from the land of Canaan, he's concerned that they may prove to be a snare.

That they may pull God's people away from true worship to worship false, dead idols and lead ultimately to the forfeiting of the land.

That's his concern. Again and again, Joshua refers to the nations. 21 times in these chapters, he refers to the nations and the false gods of those nations.

[9:15] This would prove to be the great enduring problem for the people of God. It would eventually lead to their exile, to their banishment from the land, these nations.

And so Joshua was rightly concerned, wasn't he? That they would remain faithful to the Lord and not go after the nations. So what is Joshua's charge to the leaders?

How does he encourage them to continue to live lives that are faithful in the midst of a faithless world? What is the key for us as we seek to serve the Lord in the years to come?

Well, three things Joshua underlines for Israel's leaders. Three things that stand true for us today as God's people.

If you and I are going to stay the course over the long term, here are the three key things Joshua wants us to grasp. How do God's people live faithfully in a faithless world?

[10:19] Well, number one, God's people need to look back and know God's help in the past and so we've been certain of that for the future. Number two, God's people are to superglue themselves to God.

Number three, God's people are to fear the certain judgments of God. Three simple things to grasp hold of. Number one, God's people know God's help in the past and so can be certain of it in the future.

We see here again the great note of God's enduring faithfulness to his people. That's been the constant refrain throughout the whole book up to this point.

And it's no surprise that Joshua in one of his closing addresses to the people reminds them again of God's faithfulness. He appeals to them as witnesses of God's faithfulness.

Just look at verse three. He says to them, you have seen all that the Lord your God has done to all these nations for your sake.

[11:34] For it's the Lord who has fought for you. These men he's speaking to, they have seen with their own eyes the incredible victories the Lord has brought about. The crossing of the river Jordan, the victory at Jericho, the whole conquest they can look back on.

Again and again the Lord has clearly given his people victory. Look on to verse nine. Joshua says, for the Lord has driven out before you the great and strong nations.

It is the Lord who fights for you just as he promised you. Look on again to verse 14. Joshua says, 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 has promised concerning you, all have come to pass. Not one of them has failed. They have seen with their own eyes God's overwhelming power.

God has done great things for them. God has kept his promises. promises. And that is the grounds of their hope for the future. The God who has been faithful will continue to be faithful.

[12:53] Notice the future tense in verse five. 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.

the key according to Joshua for pressing on in the long haul, for faithfulness over the long term, the key was a firm foundation in all that the Lord had already done.

That was and always is the foundation, the basis for the faithfulness of God's people as they look to the future. As you look out on a world that wants to pull you away from all that is right and true, the world that wants to pull you away from the one true faith, as you feel the attraction of the rampant radical individualism that's all around us, that constant call to be yourself, to follow your dreams, to satisfy your own desires, that constant drip, what's going to enable you to keep going as a Christian?

well Joshua points you back to all that God has done in the past and God's promises didn't end, did they, with the conquest here in Canaan?

Ultimately his promises were fulfilled in the person of the Lord Jesus. He was the promised Messiah, the son of David, the one who came as God's king and judge and he came, didn't he, with great power.

[14:35] And on the cross he defeated the great enemy fulfilling all the hopes and dreams of the Old Testament. And Jesus will return one day. And he will on that day, he will fully and finally rescue his people.

He will judge his enemies. We can look back on those events, what was future for Joshua, we can look back and we see even more evidence of God's faithfulness, don't we?

We don't only look back on those events in history, do we, in the scriptures. We can look back on our own lives. We can see his faithfulness, his great deeds that he's done for us in the midst of difficult times, in the real and solid kindnesses that the Lord has shown us, that remind us in very real ways that he never leaves, he never forsakes his people.

He's faithful, isn't he? That is the great thread that runs through Joshua's words here as he addresses the people. It's the foundational truth that will keep us going, keep you going in the long haul.

God is and will always be faithful to his words. He will be faithful to his people. That's the great reality we need to have in front of our minds as we think about the future.

[16:02] Just look back. Look at what the Lord has done for you. You can trust him for the future. But not only is God faithful to his people, there's a flip side to that, isn't there?

That coin, which is this, that God's people are to remain faithful to him. That's the second point. How will we keep going in the long haul?

Well, point two, God's people are to superglue themselves to God. It is only in the light of that great indicative, the great indicative of God's faithfulness that we come to Joshua's imperative.

Notice that therefore in verse 6, in light of all that God has done, look back on all he's done, his great promises he's kept. Verse 6, therefore, be very strong to keep and to 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, but you shall cling to the Lord your God just as you've done to this day.

And again, verse 11, 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 they shall be a snare and a trap to you.

[17:43] In light of who God is, in light of all that he's done, Joshua implores the people, he looks to them and says, be very strong to keep God's word, verse 6, be very careful to love the laws, obedience and love.

They're one and the same thing really. How do we love God? Well, we obey his word. How do we obey his word? Well, we love him. And that is made visible by what we cling to.

Joshua implored the people to cling to God, verse 8, and not to cling to the nations, verse 12.

And that word cling, it means to cling tightly, a process in which things are joined together inseparably. The root of the word in Hebrew is the basis of the modern word for glue.

Glue yourselves to God, cling to him, be super glued to the Lord. It's a good image, isn't it? To be glued to him, to be stuck to him.

[19:01] But what does that look like in reality? How do we glue ourselves to God? Well, Joshua is very clear, isn't he?

Look at verse 6 again. Therefore, be very strong to keep and to do all that is written in the book of the law of Moses. To be superglued to God means careful obedience of his word.

Joshua tells them to keep and to do everything that's been written in the book of the law, turning neither to the left nor to the right. They are to let God's word set their course. Careful obedience to God's word is crucial if they're to consolidate the conquest and live in the land over the long term. And when it comes to obeying the Lord, there is always a joyful yes as we cling to the Lord and his ways. He's a good God.

He loves his people. And all that he sets out in his book of the law is for our good. So he might live life as he intended it to the full.

[20:12] And so we joyfully say yes to obeying his word. But alongside that there's always a clear no. Careful obedience also means necessary separation.

And that's the great concern for Joshua here, isn't it? The great purpose of their obedience is to ensure and enable a necessary separation from the nation.

so they were to drive them out. So that they would be able to continue to worship and serve the one true God. To be a witness to the watching world. That's his great concern that they would be set apart for the Lord and serve him alone.

And Joshua rightly perceives that these nations are a great threat to the people of God and to their long-term future in the land.

he keeps talking about the nations and about the gods of the nations because they represented a real lure, a temptation away from true worship and into idolatry, into worshipping false gods.

[21:26] That was the great danger, a comfortable compromise with these Gentile nations. just listen to how these nations are described in Deuteronomy.

Here's what Moses says, when you come into the land that the Lord your God has given you, you shall not learn to follow the abominable practices of those nations. There shall not be found among you anyone who burns his son or his daughter as an offering, anyone who practices divination or tells fortunes or interprets omens because of these things, the Lord your God is driving them out before you.

These nations, they worshipped terrible, false gods, they did terrible things. And these nations were to be destroyed partly as a way of protecting God's people from their corrupting influence. If tolerated, if allowed to remain in the land, then the ways and idolatries of those nations would seep into the people of God, would draw them away, the lure of false religion would prove almost impossible to resist.

And as you read on through the Bible, it tells us exactly what happened and how these nations did prove to be a snare. Fear. And the lure of idolatry and false religion is not something that's consigned to the Old Testament.

[23:02] We might well think we're off the hook. But it remains a live issue, doesn't it, for God's people today? False religions, idolatry, holds real power today.

It's firmly addressed in the New Testament, isn't it? The Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 10 speaks of this generation of Israelites as an example, as a warning. And he urges the New Testament church to flee idolatry, to flee false worship.

And for us, it's the relentless secular gospel that fills the air that we breathe, that we live amongst. The drip, drip message of the autonomous self, the rejection of any sort of objective truth.

You do you. You follow your own desires. That is what determines right or wrong, what you feel is right. The theology of Disney that tells our youngsters to break free from all they've known, to look inside themselves to discover the truth and their destiny.

Or maybe it's just the overwhelming desire not to stand out, not to go against the flow, to not be labeled as a bigot or an extremist, to fit in, to have a quiet life.

[24:31] The pull away from the Lord is strong and real, we feel it, don't we? But there's one particular area, one particular threat, one particular aspect of the dangerous lure of the nations and it's the danger of the people tying themselves to the nations.

That same word, cling, he encourages the people to cling to the Lord, that same word is used in verse 12. So if you turn back and cling to the remnants of these nations remaining among you, so that's the warning, isn't it?

He says superglue yourselves to the Lord positively, but negatively he says do not superglue yourselves to the nations. Don't tie yourself to the nations.

And the key example he uses here is that of marriage. Look at the second half of verse 12. For if you turn back and cling to the remnant of these nations remaining among you, make marriages with them.

So that you associate with them and them with you. That's his warning. Do not, he says, allow your children to marry the children of the nations.

[25:50] Because they will in the end, look at verse 13, prove to be a snare, a trap. And this issue raises its head again and again as you read through.

You can see the example in the book of Nehemiah, centuries later. This was the issue he was dealing with. God's people marrying into the nations. It's the same issue that Paul addresses in 2 Corinthians 6.

He warns Christians against being unequally yoked, doesn't he, with non-believers. And so one key implication of the people supergluing themselves to the Lord is that they separate themselves from the unbelievers and specifically so in the area of marriage.

The key to gluing yourself to God is refusing to glue yourself to the nations. You can't be glued to both at the same time. It's impossible. And it's not for ethnic reasons.

Religious reasons are the reason here. They weren't to marry them because they didn't worship the same God. That's the issue. And so I'll say this very simply and straightforwardly, applying it for us today.

[27:10] If you're an unmarried Christian here, do not for a moment contemplate marrying someone who's not a believer. And the implication of that is don't date someone who's not a believer.

Who doesn't share your love for the Lord. The Bible always consistently warns about that. Now of course, there's all sorts of situations that folk may find themselves in.

Perhaps you got married years ago and you've now become a Christian. Your partner isn't a follower of Jesus. But that's not the situation Joshua's talking about here, is it?

The Bible does address that elsewhere, but that's not Joshua's concern here, is it? He's saying to these leaders, to his people, do not let your children marry the nations.

If you're a Christian and not currently married, and you long to be, we'll just heed this warning.
[28:14] And Israel's later history shows that Joshua's concerns here were not misplaced.
Compromise with the nations eventually corrupted Israel's witness, damaged its worship.

And Paul gives the same warning to the church, take care. Take care, lest you fall. But it's not only in the area of marriage is it that it's possible to glue ourselves to the world.

The ideas and the worldviews that we constantly imbibe, if we're not careful, all those ideologies, they will undermine a biblical understanding of the world.

is our thinking in reality glued to the world or to the word? How we think about all sorts of issues. What's really shaping that? How we think about the sanctity of human life, both at its beginning and its end. How is our thinking shaped about that?

[29:19] how we think about all the issues surrounding gender, sexuality. Is that shaped more by the world or the word? How we think about our money.

How we think about the purpose of our lives, what we're here to do. The priorities that we put in place. Is that more shaped by the world or the words? And if we allow our views to be shaped by the world on those issues, then bit by bit, our thinking is going to be shaped in other ways.

And over time, over the years, we'll drift. And we'll discover, perhaps to our horror, that we've glued ourselves in reality to the world and not to the Lord.

Or think on the things that our hearts long for in terms of our career or our wealth or our reputation. Those things can, if left unchecked, become the functional center around which our lives orbit.

They will absorb the best of our time and our talents and our treasure. What is really at the center? What are we really gluing ourselves to in reality?

[30:38] Is it the Lord or is it the nations? Because the nations, they will be a snare and a trap, taking us away from the good things that the Lord has given us.

Three times Joshua mentions the good land the Lord has given them, the good things. He's given you good things. If you're a Christian, he's given you so many good things. And if you tie yourself to the nations, you'll lose those good things that he's given us.

Listen again to the warning Joshua issues here in verses 12 and 13. He says, 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 them with you, you know for certain the Lord your God will no longer drive out these nations before you, but they shall be a snare and a trap for you, a whip on your sides and thorns in your eyes until you perish from off this good ground that the Lord your God has given you.

Hear that warning. We are, in the words of verse 11, to be very careful to love the Lord our God. That's how we keep going in the long term. We love the Lord by clinging to him and not to the nations and that requires care, attention, energy, making hard choices.

[32:21] But it's not reluctant, it's not a drudgery because our careful obedience, it comes out doesn't it, of a love for him, our saviour.

And our love for him is a response to his love for us. God, we love him because we've been ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven.

We love him. And so we super glue ourselves to him. We love him because of all he's done in the past for us.

That's the key, isn't it? Remember our first point? Look back on what the Lord has done for you.

And as you think about that, as you meditate on all he's done, it's not going to be a problem is it, to super glue yourself to the Lord because he's good.

He's proved it in the past. And we're to super glue ourselves to him for the future. So how do God's people live faithfully in a faithless world?

[33:22] Well, we look back to the past, we super glue ourselves to him, but lastly and briefly, God's people fear, they fear the certain judgment of God.

Now it would be lovely if this sermon finished in verse 14. Look at verse 14. Joshua says, and now I'm 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.

All have come to pass. Not one of them has failed. Done. Final hymn. But Joshua doesn't stop there, does he?

He carries on. And it's a hard word. God keeps his promises, yes, but just as he promises blessing for obedience, so he will also fulfill his promised curses for disobedience.

Joshua doesn't hold back, does he, from reminding the people that if they are to make it in the long run, if they are to remain in the land, then they are to remain faithful to God because there are consequences for disobedience. God wouldn't turn a blind eye if the people lived wherever they liked and ignored his words.

[34 : 45] This has been the way of faith for God's people in every age at all times, and it's not wrong for that to be a motivation for faithfulness. Knowing that God will keep his promises, both in terms of blessing and cursing, is a real and legitimate motivation for obedience for remaining faithful to him.

Now hold on, you might say, Joshua is being a bit underhanded here, isn't he? He's trying to scare them into being faithful. Well yes, I suppose in a way that he is.

The Lord our God is not a tame God. He is the living God of heaven and earth. He's the creator and sustainer of all things.

His son, the Lord Jesus, he is the Christ, he is the Lord and he's the judge. He is returning one day and he will come in judgment.

And that is a fearful prospect. Reading these words in these final verses. Where Joshua says, the Lord will bring upon you all the evil things that he destroyed you from off this good land that the Lord your God has given you, if you transgress the covenant of the Lord your God, which he commanded you.

[36 : 13] If you disobey, will judge. And knowing that Jesus is judge and that he will return one day to judge the living and the dead, that is one very good reason to stay the course now, to stay faithful to him, to continue to put your trust in him, the Lord, who took our place.

He took upon himself all the covenant curses so that our sin might be paid for. God has made great promises to his people.

And his promises will not fail. Both his promises for blessing, but also for cursing. And so the question is, will you cling to him?

Will you trust him? Will you superglue yourself to him? And resist the lure of the unfaithful world around us? Will we heed his gracious warning about judgments?

That's how we keep going in the long term. That's how we'll make it in the decades to come. We glue ourselves to the Lord and he will not let us go.

[37 : 34] Why don't we pray? And then we'll come together to the Lord's table. Let's pray. Let's pray. our Father in heaven, we thank you so much that you are a faithful God.

That every word you have uttered, you will fulfill. And so we do thank you that we can look to you.

We can turn to you. We can cling to you and trust that all you've said will come to pass. And as we turn to you, as we cling to you, we know with certainty that we will be safe for all eternity.

You will not let us go. And so, Father, please help us. Give us courage. Give us clarity in our thinking to resist the way of the world and to turn to you, to cling to you, because you are a good God.

Help us. Help us to keep going today and tomorrow and in the years to come. Before we ask it in Jesus' name, Amen.