

Joshua 23 Personal Farewell

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1, Setting

This and Josh 24 are the farewell addresses of Joshua.

Comparison to other farewells

Jacob, Gen 49

Moses, Deut 31

David, 2 Sam 31 (public), 1 Kings 2 (Solomon)

Elisha, 2 Kings 13:14-20 (private, to Joash)

Our Lord, Upper Room Discourse, John 13-17 (but he is a case apart)

General principles

- Pervasiveness of the curse; even servants of the Lord must die.
- Value of experience, cf. role of elders. You have the most to say worth hearing right at the end. Contrast the emphasis in our society on inaugural lectures and speeches, to reassure people that they chose the right leader!
- The sense of responsibility that these men have for their people; desire to enable the people to carry on after their departure.

Relation between Josh 23 and Josh 24

At first glance these seem similar:

- Joshua calls the same group of people together, “all Israel, their elders, and their heads, and their judges, and their officers” (23:2; cf. 24:1).
- Reminder of the victory God has given them (23:3-4, 9, 14; 24:6-13)
- Exhortations to godliness (23:6-8, 11; 24:14-15)
- Warnings against the consequences of apostasy (23:12-13, 16; 24:20)

But there are several critical differences that are illuminating.

Place.—24 is at *Shechem*, the place where Jacob first made his camp upon returning from Padan-Aram (Gen 33:18-20; Shalem should be rendered as an adverb, “safely,” the fulfillment of the request in 28:21 “in peace”). The city lies between Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim, and is thus the site of the reading of the law in Josh 8:30-35, per Moses’ command in Deut 11:29-30, cf. Deut 27-28. This is a city with great historical significance for the nation.

We are not told precisely where 23 takes place. It might be at Shiloh, the last place we see the tribes assembled (22:12), after the report of Phinehas on the altar named Ed. Or some time may have passed, and since we are reminded that Joshua is old and stricken in years; the most natural understanding is that he summons the people to his home in Timnath-Serah (19:49-50).

Person.—In 24:1, Joshua summons the people “to God,” while there is no such reference in 23.

Participation.—23 is simply a lecture by Joshua to the people. 24 consists of a series of queries to which they must respond.

Structure.—When we study 24, we will see that it has a distinctive literary structure associated with second-millennium suzerainty treaties, that is, treaties binding vassals to their lords, and that this structure is used elsewhere in the OT to record the Lord’s covenant with Israel.

Conclusion.—24 is a legal process between Israel and the Lord, in which they renew his covenant over them (cf. v.25), as they accepted it initially at Sinai (cf. Exod 19:4-8 with Josh 24:6-18). 23 is a personal exhortation from Joshua to the people.

Application.—Our current political discourse is dominated by the notion of a distinction between a man’s personal life and his official responsibilities. Such a distinction would have been foreign to Joshua. His official position as the head of the theocratic community is inseparable from his personal love and concern for the people. While the two addresses show that the roles are distinct, the similarity of their contents emphasizes how completely in harmony they were.

So in our roles in the family, at work, in the church, we should strive for consistency between the personal and the positional.

Structure

A symphony in three movements, each building on the previous, repeating some elements, introducing some new ones.

2-8, God’s past and future blessings

9-13, Warning against social apostasy

14-16, Warning against spiritual apostasy

2-8, God’s Past and Future Blessings

2, Joshua’s Motivation

He is failing in old age. Same notice that we saw in 13:1, where it was the motive for the division of the land (“Joshua, you won’t live long enough to complete the detailed conquest in person.”) Recall that we contrasted it with Caleb in 14:6-11. As in ch. 13, it brings to mind something that must be done before he departs: a final exhortation to the people.

He brings this up here, in his personal address, but not in 24, the official covenant renewal.

3-4, What They Have Seen

Note his emphasis on their own experience of God’s goodness; cf. the reprise of this same theme in v.14, “ye know in all your hearts and in all your souls.” This exhortation is not misplaced, for it is the natural character of the sinful heart to forget God’s blessings and focus on our disappointments. Compare the murmurings in the wilderness. He emphasizes to them 1) the goodness of God, and 2) the fact that they themselves have witnessed it.

He calls out two details in particular, which ought to guard them against two errors to which the sinful heart is prone:

3, What God has done.—Note the emphasis on God’s agency: “for the LORD your God [is] he that hath fought for you.” They have seen the result of supernatural work in the battles they have fought. Thus they must not yield to the sin of unbelief, asking, “Is God really among us?” This is how Israel tempted God, Exod 17:7; cf. 1 Cor. 10:9. If you will bow before the Lord, his spirit will show you that he has *not* forsaken you, but his victories *are* evident in your life. “You have seen.”

4, What man has done.—Now we have just the opposite emphasis, on human agency. Joshua’s concern is not to steal glory from God; the previous verse shows that. Rather, he wants to emphasize to them that God is able to work through people, in spite of their natural weakness. Thus they must not yield to the sin of despair, being so overwhelmed with the sense of their own weakness that they give up. This was Moses’ sin in Exod 3:11; 4:1,10. We *are* earthen vessels, yet for all that, God is pleased to place his treasure in us, and we must not doubt what he can do through us. Again, “You have seen.” If you will just stop and consider, you will realize that God has worked through you.

This twofold theme is so important that Joshua will repeat it in v.9. Satan would have us believe that God has forsaken us and we are so sinful that we can do nothing. The result will be paralysis. But the truth of the matter is that God is with us, he has worked through us, and if we will just pause and think about things, we will realize ourselves that this is the case. “You have seen.” Don’t forget it.

5, What God Has Promised

He exhorts them to recall the past so that they will have faith going on into the future. Note again that both human and divine agency are brought before their mind.

- God will expel the Canaanites who remain.
- The Israelites will enter into the enjoyment of the land.

Joshua grounded their faith in God’s *past* actions by an appeal to what they have seen. Now he grounds their faith in God’s *future* actions by an appeal to what God has said: “as the LORD your God hath promised unto you.” Cf. Exod 23:23; 34:11; Deut 7:1; 12:29.

Application.—The reminder of the past guards against the sin of despair. The reminder of the future guards against the sin of carelessness. Knowledge that “we are labourers together with God” (1 Cor. 3:9) guards us against both worrying over the size of the obstacles we face (God will take care of those) and “leaving it all up to God” (he expects us to exert ourselves mightily for his cause). Compare Phil 2:12-13.

Note carefully Joshua’s stance of faith with regard to these promises.

- God had promised them possession of the land, with the removal of the previous inhabitants.
- Yet at this point the previous inhabitants are not all removed. That’s why the land was divided (ch. 13), and much of Judges is concerned with Israel’s continuing struggle with these elements.

- Unbelief would say, “God’s promises have failed. He said he would give us the land, and he hasn’t.” In fact, one commentator takes Joshua as a satire on God’s unfulfilled promises.
- Belief says that the Word of God cannot fail, and if it hasn’t been fulfilled yet, look to the future. This is Joshua’s stance, and the one we should adopt.

6-8, Exhortation

The force of this exhortation becomes clearer if we make some structural observations.

- Notice ABA (Positive, Negative, Positive) pattern of commands.
- There is a grammatical shift in the middle of the Negative section, at the colon in v.7. Not clear in English, but unambiguous in Hebrew, from infinitive clause to finite clause.
- There is a corresponding shift in subject at this point, from association with the nations to serving their gods.
- This theological perspective persists through the closing positive statement.
- Suggests that the first positive statement is intended to go with the first negative.

In the next two sections of the chapter, we will see echoes of these two themes (social in 9-13, i.e., v.12, and theological in 13-16, i.e., 16a). But before we move on, we can draw some conclusions from this particular constellation of ideas. Start from the end and work backward:

- The big objective (7b, 8) is faithfulness to the Lord. This is the first of the ten commandments, “Thou shalt have no other gods before me.”
- The greatest threat to our faithfulness to the Lord is “coming among these nations” that “remain” (7a). The friendship of the world is enmity with God (James 4:4), “He who walks in the counsel of the ungodly, will soon stand in the way of sinners, and sit in the seat of scorners” (TSK). Cf. Deut. 7:1-5.
- Keeping the law of Moses (6) is God’s way of making them distinct from the people around them. Personal holiness can contribute to our spiritual health, as a kind of prophylaxis. If you speak differently, dress differently, act differently from the world, you are less likely to get sucked into their errors and idolatry.

Distribute structured text at this point.

The next two sections pick up many of the themes of this first section, but they add to it a warning of the consequences if the exhortation is not followed. 9-13 focuses on the consequences of not following the exhortation about social purity, while 14-16 follows the exhortation to spiritual faithfulness.

9-13, Warning against Social Apostasy

As the structured text shows, verses 9-11 recap the themes of the first section, while 12-13 take us into new material.

9-11, Recap

Their past victory reflects both God's faithfulness and the power he has given them. Thus they must not despair over either his imagined departure or their own sin.

10, Hope for the future, again involving both God's provision and their active involvement, and again focusing on God's promise. Thus (again) they must not worry about their weakness or abandon their responsibility.

11, Exhortation to "take heed unto yourselves" (lit., "be on your guard with respect to your souls) to love the Lord. Note especially the form of the expression: not just "love the lord," but guard your soul so that you can love the Lord.

- Cf. Prov. 4:23, "keep thy heart with all diligence, for out of it are the issues of life." Guard your affections, your thoughts. Watch what you let in. Do you spend more time in movies than in the Word of God? More time in social activities with unbelievers than with the people of God?
- Cf. Col. 3, "set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth."

Satan does not usually attack frontally, but obliquely. If he can win over our thoughts about "minor things," he can then replace God as the center of our love.

12-13, New Material

The new material consists of a detailed description of how they may fail, and an analysis of the consequences.

12 focuses on the social sin anticipated in 6-7a, mingling too closely with the people of this world. Singles out the specific danger of marriage with an unbeliever, following the warning of Deut 7. Mixed marriages do occur.

- Sometimes two unbelievers marry and one of them receives the Lord. This is good, better than if both of them remained unsaved.
- But sometimes you think someone is a believer and you are mistaken. This is tragic.

If you are a believer, be very sure about your partner before you commit yourself in marriage. If serving the Lord is not the first thing in your partner's life, don't even contemplate union.

13 describes the result that will ensue from such indiscretion: instead of giving them possession of the land, God will turn against them as he has turned against the Canaanites.

Application.—Note that the pain he promises will come from the Canaanites: "THEY shall be snares ... traps ... scourges ... thorns." Sometimes you are tempted into a mixed marriage by what you feel is overwhelming love. "We love each other so very, very much, this just has to be right. I'm not willing to give up my future happiness for an old-fashioned rule about not marrying unbelievers." But the very person without whom you feel you can't live, will become a source of deep pain and destruction to you. Don't do it!

14-16, Warning against Spiritual Apostasy

This section combines strong similarities with striking differences from the first two sections.

Similarities

14 repeats the emphasis of 2-3 on his departure and their personal experience of the Lord's goodness and provision.

- His departure: not just old age, but approaching death, and reminds them that this is "the way of all the earth." They will one day have to walk it too. Will they be ready?
- Their personal experience of God's faithfulness to his promises.

14b-15 repeats the past/future pattern of the first two sections. God expects us to "look both ways before crossing."

16 has the same three themes as 12-13 (description of sin, Lord's anger, perish from off the land). As 12 picked up the theme of social apostasy from the exhortation in 6-8, so 16 picks up the theme of the spiritual apostasy that naturally results from it.

Differences

Emphasis on "good things" that God has given (14, 15, 16; previously only "good land" at end of second section in 13). This is implicit in the recounting of God's care in the past in the previous two sections, but here he brings it to the fore.

No reference to human effort in past or future. In this third section he no longer recalls their labors together with God. Why not? Answer: Because in this section, unlike the first two, he sees them as God's enemies, not his servants.

15, Future focuses on judgment, not victory.

No exhortation. Why?

Joshua sadly realizes that they will in fact fall away. 16, "WHEN you have transgressed," contrast 12, "IF you do in any wise go back." And now the sin is not just the seed (social compromise), but the bitter fruit (worshiping false gods).

Summary

The similar headings in 2-3 and 14 mark two halves of the chapter.

The first half, in two sections, looks forward to the nation's continued obedience to the Lord, but warns them against the danger of sin.

In the second half, Joshua sees a much more pessimistic picture, one of sin, and judgment.

The nation stands at a crossroads. Will they continue to serve the Lord and battle effectively against sin? Or will they yield, and suffer his judgment? There is no third option, no way of ease. This life is one either of battle, or of defeat. May God give us courage to choose the way of struggle and blessing, not the way of defeat and death.