

Joshua 24 Three Funerals

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As Joshua opens with the death and burial of Moses (cf. Deut 34), so it closes with the death and burial of Joshua and Eleazar, and the burial of Joseph. The recounting of these three burials, all in the land of promise, rounds off the first six books of the Bible, which in many ways are more of a unit than just the first five. These individuals represent three critical phases in the history of the nation:

- Joseph: represents the patriarchal days. Born in Padan-Aram, came with his father Jacob back to Canaan, then led the family into Egypt.
- Joshua: born in slavery in Egypt, experienced the wilderness wanderings. With Caleb, the only adult with memory of Egypt to enter into the land.
- Eleazar: must have been less than 20 at Kadesh-Barnea. Representative of the generation that conquered the land and occupied it.

All three are laid to rest in Canaan. After centuries of pilgrimage, God's chosen nation is finally settled in its intended home. The historical foundation is laid for the rest of the OT.

29-31, Death and Burial of Joshua

The comments in these verses show us two important foundations for effective service to God.

His Title, "Servant of the Lord," 29

Joshua's Graduation

Moses is the first to bear this title: Deut 34:5; Josh 1:1; and throughout Joshua.

Joshua is called this for the first time here, and again in the parallel text Judg 2:8. He was introduced in 1:1 as "Moses' minister" (Josh 1:1), but has been without further title through the entire book until now. At his death, the Spirit of God records this eulogy over him, that he too was "the servant of the Lord."

What does the title mean?

Compare Abraham's title "friend of God" 2 Chr 20:7; Isa 41:8; James 2:23.

John 15:15 compares the two titles, but note from 2 Tim 2:24 that the title "servant" is still appropriate for God's people. What is the relation between the two titles?

Consider those who bear the title "servant of the Lord" in the OT:

- David bears this title in Ps 18:1; 36:1. He is "my servant" in 2 Sam 3:18; 7:5,8; etc.
- Caleb (Num 14:24), who supported Joshua in encouraging the people to go in and take the land.
- Hag 2:23 calls Zerubbabel, the civil leader under the return (cf. Hag 1:1), "my servant."

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- Job (1:8; 2:3; 42:7,8) in his function as representing God’s righteousness to Satan and his friends.
- Isaiah (20:3)
- Eliakim (Isa 22:20-22), a “father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and to the house of Judah”
- Perhaps most significantly, the title “his [God’s] servant” and “my servant” appear regularly in the Servant Songs of Isaiah (e.g., Isa 52:13) as prophetic of the Messiah.

In every case these individuals exercise a significant ministry toward other people. The exhortation in 2 Tim 2:24 is in the same vein. Abraham’s title focuses on his relation with God (James 2:23), independent of other people.

Application.—We can aspire to both of these titles.

- As those justified by faith (like Abraham), we are the friends of the Lord Jesus, and enjoy the intimacy of fellowship with him.
- In our ministry to one another as members of the body of Christ, we are the servants of the Lord.

Back to the Graduation

With this background, the transition from “Moses’ minister” to “servant of the Lord” holds additional insight. Effectiveness in ministering to the Lord’s people is a learned art. Even the ultimate Servant of the Lord, our Lord Jesus, “learned obedience through the things which he suffered” (Heb 5:8). We can learn it through long and sometimes painful personal experience (Moses in the wilderness, David fleeing Saul), but it is a great help and blessing when God provides a mentor, as in the case of Moses to Joshua or Paul to Timothy or Barnabas to John Mark. We should not despise such opportunities to be a minister to some servant of the Lord, for it can give us excellent preparation for our own service to the Lord.

His Heritage, 31

We recognize him as the Lord’s servant because under his guidance, the people served the Lord, and they continued to do so during the lifetimes of the elders who had served under him. They had been his “ministers” as he was Moses’, and learned from him.

There is a limit to their effectiveness. Only the ones who had “known all the works of the Lord” were effective in keeping the nation straight. After that they fell into idolatry (Judg 2:6-13). A personal experience of God’s power is essential to staying true to him. The best teacher or mentor in the world cannot make you effective if you do not know the works of the Lord by direct personal experience. Examples: salvation, victory over sin, effectiveness in witness.

Summary

Two foundations to effective service to God:

- Take advantage of the experience of godly people who have gone before.
- Recognize the importance of your own immediate spiritual experience with the Lord.

32, Burial of Joseph

Cf. Gen 50:24-26 (the last verses in Genesis). Joseph treasured the promise given to the patriarchs. In spite of the high position he enjoyed in Egypt, he wanted to be with God's people when they entered into those promises. This command places him in the honor role of faith, Heb 11:22 "By faith Joseph, when he died, made mention of the departing of the children of Israel; and gave commandment concerning his bones."

Application.—Sometimes God's immediate blessings can distract us from the ultimate objective. God greatly blessed Joseph to deliver him from prison and make him ruler over Egypt. Joseph could have been so preoccupied with the wealth and splendor of Egypt that he might desire the opulent tomb he certainly could have commanded there. But he did not lose sight of the ultimate promise, and in fact that is the point of Heb. 11:13-16. This attitude of faith is what enables us to use the world without abusing it, 1 Cor 7:31.

The selection of a burial ground is interesting. While his descendants could have chosen any location within their broad territory, they select the plot of land first described in Gen 33:18-19, Jacob's first recorded encampment on his return to the land. (Succoth is on the east bank of Jordan.) This spot would have been Joseph's first experience of the land of promise as a young boy; now it is where he is laid to rest centuries after his death.

33, Death and Burial of Eleazar

Succeeded to his father Aaron as High Priest in Num 20:23-29.

Lead figure in distributing the land in Joshua: "Eleazar the priest, and Joshua the son of Nun, and the heads of the fathers of the tribes of the children of Israel," 14:1 (initial distribution); 17:4 (daughters of Zelophehad), 19:51 (summary, inclusio with 14:1), 21:1 (Levites).

Why emphasize him at this point? Probably because this is the changing of the guard, and "the guard" throughout Israel's history consisted of separate political and priestly representatives.

- Moses and Aaron
- Joshua and Eleazar
- King and High Priest throughout the monarchy
- Zerubbabel the governor of Judah and Joshua the high priest in the return

This separation is so strong that King Uzziah was smitten with leprosy for attempting to combine the two roles, 2 Chron 26:16-21. The only OT character who combines these roles is Melchizedek, "king of Salem, priest of the most high God" (Gen 14:18), and he is explicitly a type, if not a preappearance, of the Lord Jesus. Thus the uniqueness of our Lord as the Messiah, the anointed one, who alone brings together the offices of prophet, priest, and king.

So Josh 24 records the passing of Joshua and Eleazar together to show the changing of the guard, setting the foundation for the failure of the next generation, who has not known the works of the Lord.

The End of the Story?

Joshua is not the only book in the Bible to end with a funeral. Such endings are characteristic of Gen-Josh, the historical foundation of the OT.

- Genesis (50:26) ends with Joseph's death and being placed "in a coffin in Egypt," in the land of bondage.
- Deut (34:5,6) ends with Moses' death and burial in the land of Moab, in the wilderness. Better than the land of bondage, but not yet in the land of promise.
- Joshua ends with three burials in the land of promise. Thus it lays the foundation for the rest of Israel's history.
- Josh 24:31 sounds an ominous note, anticipating the recurrent failure that characterizes that later history (Judges through Kings). Israel is in the land, but the departure of her spirit-filled human leaders means that the ordinary people, without the presence of God's spirit, will fall away.

Compare the end of the foundation books of the NT, the gospels.

- Each of the gospels ends with a death and burial, but then with a resurrection (e.g., Mark 15:37; 16:6).
- In spite of the departure of the NT Joshua (Jesus), the church goes on victoriously—just contrast the book of Acts with Judges-Kings. Now God's people are indwelt by the HS, and have no need for charismatic human leaders to guarantee their holiness.

It may be worth looking ahead to the Revelation, which ends with the death of death and the destruction of all evil (21:4,8).