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Bridgeway Church
Joshua #14

Sermon Summary #14

Cling to the Lord your God! Joshua 23:1-16

A little more than two months after I was born, General Douglas MacArthur stood before the Congress of the United States and spoke these now famous words:

“The world has turned over many times since I took the oath on the plain at West Point, and the hopes and dreams have long since vanished; but I still remember the refrain of one of the most popular barracks ballads of that day which proclaimed loudly that *old soldiers never die, they just fade away*. And like the old soldier in that ballad, I now close my military career and just fade away, an old soldier who tried to do his duty as God gave him the sight to see that duty.”

Centuries before, an even greater military general stood in the presence of the leaders of his nation and, like General MacArthur, spoke his final words. His, though, was not a sentimental speech of fading hopes and dying dreams. General Joshua’s final words to Israel were nothing less than a call to spiritual arms, for there were yet many battles to fight.

Joshua 23 and 24 are more than simply the final two chapters of this OT book. *They are the final words of Joshua himself, in which he exhorts and encourages and warns the Israelites to remain faithful to the God who has remained faithful to them.*

It’s not that difficult to determine *when* Joshua delivered this final speech. According to v. 1, it was “a long time after” the conquest of Canaan when he spoke to representative leaders of Israel. We know the events of chapters 23-24 occurred shortly before Joshua’s death at the age of 110 (see 24:29). We also know that Joshua was the same age as Caleb and that Caleb was 85 years old when the conquest ended. Therefore, Joshua delivered this speech approximately *25 years after Israel had defeated the last of their enemies* and had taken possession of the land of promise.

When MacArthur delivered his speech before Congress his greatest fear was that he, MacArthur, would be forgotten. ***Joshua’s greatest fear was that God would be forgotten.*** His overriding concern was that Israel would become complacent and smug and self-satisfied and forsake God and follow after the pagan deities of their Canaanite neighbors. His fears, as subsequent history was to prove, were well-founded. No matter how godly and devoted one generation may be, the next one is always at risk.

Consider this one example. Were you aware that both sets of *Ernest Hemingway’s* grandparents were committed evangelical Christians? Both paternal grandparents graduated from Wheaton College. They were close friends of the evangelist D. L. Moody. One of Hemingway’s uncles was a missionary to China. Yet, after leaving his evangelical home he abandoned all semblance of spirituality and faith and once said, “I live in a vacuum that is as lonely as a radio tube when the batteries are dead and there is no current to plug into.” He eventually committed suicide.

Or again, yet another example is *the history of our country’s oldest universities*. Were you aware that they all began as evangelical Christian colleges that were established to train men for pastoral ministry? Harvard, Yale, and Princeton were created to perpetuate and proclaim the faith of orthodox Christianity. One looks at Princeton today and stands amazed at the little known fact that the great puritan pastor and my personal theological hero, Jonathan Edwards, was once its president!

Joshua was fearful that in the generations following his death Israel would depart from the faith. ***His fears were justified.*** That is precisely what happened. In an earlier sermon in this series I directed your attention to **Judges 2:6-13**. Let’s look briefly at it again.

“When Joshua dismissed the people, the people of Israel went each to his inheritance to take possession of the land. And the people served the LORD all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua, who had seen all the great work that the LORD had done for Israel. And Joshua the son of Nun, the servant of the LORD, died at the age of 110 years. And they buried him within the boundaries of his inheritance in Timnath-heres, in the hill country of Ephraim, north of the mountain of Gaash. And all that generation also were gathered to their fathers. **And there arose another generation after them who did not know the LORD or the work that he had done for Israel.**

And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD and served the Baals. And they abandoned the LORD, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt. They went after other gods, from among the gods of the peoples who were around them, and bowed down to them. And they provoked the LORD to anger. They abandoned the LORD and served the Baals and the Ashtaroth” (Judges 2:6-13).

The statement in Judges 2:10 is simply stunning: **“there arose another generation after them who did not know the Lord or the work that he had done for Israel.”** This isn’t intellectual ignorance. Their not knowing the Lord wasn’t because they lacked facts or historical record. These people weren’t atheists!

Rather, they simply chose to *ignore* God. It wasn’t that they denied God’s existence or questioned whether he had truly done all the mighty miracles we’ve seen in Joshua. They simply regarded him as irrelevant for their lives. Their needs and goals and desires could be easily fulfilled in some way other than by turning to and trusting in the God of Israel. They put him out of their minds. Instead of awe and wonder and gratitude they became bored and complacent and smug. The results of their failure to remember God is vividly portrayed in vv. 11-13 (see above).

And what was **God’s response**? The rest of Judges 2 mentions two things:

(1) **“They provoked the Lord to anger”** (2:12b). And thus instead of fighting on their behalf and guarding them from the Canaanites, “he gave them over to plunderers” (2:15). But listen: all this was precisely “as the Lord had warned, and as the Lord had sworn to them” (2:15b). God’s anger was an expression of his faithfulness to his own word! It was “faithful anger” that had its roots in love! He had clearly warned them that if they turned away and went after false gods they would suffer in precisely this way. Why? Because God is a jealous God and will not tolerate such spiritual adultery in his wife! God will not allow his people to sin with impunity!

(2) But notice also, in v. 18, that the Lord raised up “judges” for them to guide them and guard them, “for the Lord was moved to **pity** (compassion!) by their groaning.” The very God who in discipline gave them over into the hands of their enemies also saved them from those very enemies! Tragically, though, no sooner did a judge die than the people revert once again to their idolatrous and immoral ways.

How could this possibly have happened? (1) They were seduced by what they saw. Their eyes and thus their hearts were filled with the sensuality and decadence of the surrounding pagan culture and they were lured away. Canaanite religion was explicitly and pervasively sexual in nature. Ritual prostitution was rampant. I’ve said this countless times: **you can’t control the fact that you and I must live in this world, but you can control how much of this world you allow yourself to see.** (2) They became satisfied with the status quo, that is to say, they were content to rest on the achievements of their parents and grandparents. Someone once said, **“Hate is not the opposite of love. Apathy is.”** They simply ceased to care, thinking that the commitment of their ancestors would carry them through and win favor with God. (3) They took God’s blessings for granted. They viewed his past favor and his bestowal of the land as a matter of entitlement.

But one doesn’t have to follow the path of the subsequent generations. **There is a way to maintain one’s commitment to God. Joshua proposed a three-fold approach** to preventing apostasy that entails the past, the present, and the future. He calls on them/us to remember the past, to be responsible in the present, and to contemplate the results of the future.

(1) **Remembrance of the Past** (vv. 3-5)

These verses are Joshua's urgent plea for the Israelites to remember the past: to recall God's goodness and his faithfulness on their behalf. The primary point of remembrance is that *God had fought for them*:

“And Moses said to the people, ‘Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the Lord, which he will work for you today. For the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall never see again. The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to be silent’” (Exodus 14:13-14).

When Israel balked at the borders of the promised land, fearful of the Canaanites, Moses spoke to them: “The Lord your God who goes before you will himself fight for you, just as he did for you in Egypt before your eyes” (Deut. 1:30).

Again, “You shall not fear them, for it is the Lord your God who fights for you” (Deut. 3:22; cf. 20:4).

And on that day when God stopped the shining of the sun in response to Joshua's prayer we read: “There has been no day like it before or since, when the Lord heeded the voice of a man, for the Lord fought for Israel” (Joshua 10:14).

The only way to account for Israel's military dominance is the presence and power of God. Moses' army of slaves and Joshua's army of shepherds were hardly a match for either the military might of Egypt and Pharaoh or the Canaanite kings and their cities.

But why is it so important to remember? Because *sin is almost always the fruit of forgetting!* We forget our former condition, we forget God's saving love, we forget his forgiveness, we forget Scripture. This is why it is so crucial that we recall and retell the great works of God and pass along to the next generation the truth of who God is and what he has done. See especially **Psalms 44:1-3 and 78:1-7**.

But what might it mean to say that God fights **our** battles **for us today**? Our conflict as the Church isn't one of armed confrontation with other nations. But we do have enemies and we do need God's powerful intervention. So how does this truth in Joshua speak to us today?

Our primary enemy is Satan and his demonic hosts. According to Ephesians 6:12, “we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” And in this conflict God fights for us no less than he did for Joshua and the people of Israel.

“Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. . . . Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm” (Eph. 6:10-11, 13).

We also wage war against the flesh and the impulses of sinful temptation. God fights for us in this arena by supplying us with the incentive, as well as the spiritual and moral energy not only to resist and say No to temptation but also by infusing us with his power to joyfully acknowledge and fulfill his commands. This is the point of *Philippians 2:12-13* as well as *Hebrews 13:20-21*.

Finally, we wage war against the world and its allure and the empty promises it makes. And how does God “fight” our battles for us in this arena? ***He does it by deepening our delight in Jesus Christ in such a way that the taste of worldly pleasure turns sour in our souls. The world and all that it offers will always be appealing until such time that we believe and act upon the truth that knowing and loving and enjoying Jesus is more pleasing and more satisfying.***

(2) ***Responsibility in the Present (vv. 6-11)***

The point of remembering the past is to provide us with the incentive and stimulus and encouragement for responsible living in the present. Let me summarize what Joshua says with 4 “A's”.

a) Give **attention** to God's Word (v. 6).

God never blesses disobedience. A mind filled with Scripture can critically evaluate secular society and can see through the empty values of the modern world and can resist assimilation.

Note well: A clear and unmistakable warning sign of impending abandonment of God is a diminishing respect for the authority of his Word. A disregard for biblical inspiration and authority is always the first step to spiritual rebellion. Joshua is talking about "keeping" and "doing" God's Word, not simply giving tacit consent to its claims. This is more than saying, "Well, we affirm biblical authority in our statement of faith. That's enough." No, it's not. We must be "strong" to keep it and do it and not deviate from it either to the right or the left.

b) **Avoid** pagan influence (v. 7).

Note the relationship between vv. 6 and 7. The way one avoids being shaped and fashioned after the mold of pagan society is precisely by keeping and doing God's Word! There will always be a temptation to think the world has it better off than we do. See Exodus 23:13! If you have Scripture on your lips and the praise of God's name in your mouth you won't have room or time for even so much as acknowledging anything else!

c) **Attach** yourself to God (v. 8).

The word translated "cling" is the same as is translated "hold fast" or "cleave" in Genesis 2:24 where God says a man should leave his father and mother and "cleave" to his wife. See especially how this is emphasized in **Deuteronomy 10:20-21; 11:22; and 13:4**.

So what does it mean to "cling" to God? Try to envision the intimate embrace of a husband and wife. Try to envision the young child holding fast to his father's hand. To "cling" to God is to stay so close to him that no sin can get between you. To "cling" to God is to strategically plan for time alone with him for prayer and praise and the study of his Word. To "cling" to God is to trust in his promises, to seek his favor, to care only for his approval and not that of men, to invest one's time in his service, and to always keep his praise on one's lips. See Psalm 63:7-8.

d) Cultivate a deep **affection** for him in every way (vv. 9-11).

"Be very careful . . . to love the Lord your God" (v. 11). Note how often Joshua refers to God as "your" God. No fewer than 12x – 23:3(2), 5(2), 8, 10, 11, 13(2), 14, 15, 16! The emphasis here is on a relationship of intimacy: "I am yours and you are mine!" God is not just God. He is "your" / "my" God. He is mine and yours because of his desire to give himself to us in covenant loyalty. His passion for us is undying.

(3) **Results in the Future (vv. 12-16)**

To this point Joshua has referred only to divine grace and favor. Now he turns to divine discipline. If they turn away from God they must face the consequences of it in the future. Joshua isn't describing the loss of eternal life but the loss of earthly inheritance in the land.

God's faithfulness is a two-edged sword: He is faithful both in grace and in discipline.

Conclusion: As noted earlier, the enemies we face today are not those that Joshua and the people of Israel encountered as they took possession of the promised land. If anything, our enemies are more dangerous, more cunning, more deceptive, and make promises to us that have greater potential for luring us away from the goodness and grace of God. Yet, though our enemies be different, the strategy for confronting them remains much the same:

- give **attention** to God's Word!
- **avoid** pagan influence!
- **attach** yourself to God!
- cultivate a deep **affection** for him in every way!