

God's Promises

Scholars classify Joshua as the first book of Israel's "Deuteronomic History"



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that includes Judges, 1-2 Samuel, and 1-2 Kings. This collection was finalized and edited during the Babylonian exile, when Israel desperately needed to know their history and God's purpose for them as his people. Exile was a time of lost memories, despair, and desperation. The phrase "foxhole prayer" comes to mind, when a soldier is trapped with no sure recourse other than a miracle from God. Captivity in Babylon was Israel's moment of truth when they began to understand they had ignored God's love and directions, voiced by Joshua at the conclusion of his life.

Joshua 23 opens when Israel has occupied the land of promise, but there are still territories to subdue and opponents to defeat. Joshua is old. Remember he left Egypt with Moses, who was his mentor. He was one of the two spies that returned from scouting Canaanite lands with the report that Israel should move forward to claim the land. But the people refused and wandered forty years in the wilderness until that generation died and Moses came to the end of his life. Joshua has led Israel in epic victories and now the time has come for them to solidify their control, build a nation, and become a testimony for the true God to the whole world.

"The Lord had given rest to Israel from all their enemies all around ... (when) Joshua summoned all Israel" to remind them whose they were and all that God would continue to do for them (vv. 1-4). There was still work to do and battles to win. They had the witness of the past and were more mature in faith, but the question was, would they stay faithful? They now have the law as a foundation for daily living, the tabernacle as a visible reminder and framework for their faith, and the Levites and priests to teach them and lead in worship. Now

the people must choose God every day and in every circumstance.

There are practical warnings as well. Every day they will be exposed to the established pagan gods of other cultures. At that time gods were often territorial and numerous. Those gods were believed to control crop successes or failures, the fertility of women, financial success or failure, the weather, and provide answers for every need. Marriage, business contracts, peace treaties, and military success all depended on offerings, sacrifices, and prayers to these effigies of stone and precious metal. Israel would face the constant social pressure to worship these pagan gods, but Joshua warns them to "hold fast to the Lord" (v. 8).

In fact the language "to hold fast" is a strong verb used for the way a husband cleaves to his wife steadfastly and faithfully. There is only one God and Israel must never waver in that ultimate truth. Joshua builds his instructions on God's proven faithfulness: "Not one thing has failed of all the good things that the Lord your God promised concerning you" (v. 14).

There exists a clear connection between that evolving Israel and us. For all who seek to follow God there are both promises and warnings, choices to make every day. As Christians we talk about growing in faith. Sanctification is our code word, meaning the process of becoming more like Jesus in our thinking and behavior.

As the Jews in Babylonian exile read the words of Joshua they understood this was no idle threat. They also read God's promise to love and direct them. Like ancient Israel we face challenges and we often wander from our commitment to God. But in our case we have more than the words of Joshua. We have the example, words, and cross of Jesus Christ, the love of God in a tangible form.

Revisit the time you first understood God has given you his love in Christ and accepted you as his child. Consider the different times you have found

God's strength helping you face difficulty and heartache. How has God blessed you? Like Israel, we face temptations to rely on our own devices or manipulate a situation for our benefit. Our idols are not golden statues or religious systems. Instead, our idols seduce us through clever advertising, money, success, pleasure, power, possessions, and social standing. None of these can promise real happiness, inner peace, steadfast love, hope in the darkness, or experiencing a meaningful life. We may chastise Israel for their lack of faith, but we often resemble them in our choices and living.

Joshua told Israel to never forget their past, a magnificent story of God's faithfulness and intervention. They must remain faithful to the God who cared deeply for them. He was not talking about just keeping traditions and observing rituals. Those were reminders and exercises to help them remember and focus on God. Joshua was talking about loving God, devoting self to God, living in the security of God's unfailing love. He was talking about worship in the secret places of your heart, praying because you know God cares and is listening, and reaching out to those who do not know God's grace. Faithfulness is intentional – not an on-and-off again attitude, not just happy moments, and not reserved for when others are looking at you.

Israel's existed in order to be God's witness to a lost world. But when Jesus came among us Israel had become a closed society, focused on ritual, legalism, and exclusiveness. That sounds similar to many "Christian" groups today. Will you choose to be different, to love the outcasts and those suffering, to involve yourself and give to benevolent causes, to share God's love wherever you encounter need? Will you study God's written word, worship with other believers, love by the example and words of Jesus, and pray for the seemingly endless wrongs of our day? Joshua's call to faithfulness is still true: never forget what God has done for you and remain faithful. That is our calling.