

## “All the Good Things that the LORD Your God Promised”

*The eighty-seventh in a series: “I Will be Your God and You Will Be My People.”*

**Texts: Joshua 23:1-16; 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1**

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When Moses died, the people of Israel surely thought he could never be replaced. Years later when Joshua says farewell to his people, there can be no doubt that Joshua had shown himself to be a worthy successor to Moses. In fact, Joshua is a true biblical hero in every sense of the term. He was called by God to be covenant mediator. His leadership and skills as a general have been apparent throughout this book. But now as Joshua comes to the end of his life and says goodbye to the nation he has led, he will speak to the people of Israel and exhort them to remain faithful to the covenant God made with them at Mount Sinai. As he gives this speech to the leaders of Israel, Joshua sounds much like Jacob and Moses before him. Joshua is emphatic: The people of Israel must love their covenant LORD. They must do everything within them to obey God’s law. And they must never allow themselves to become enamored with the pagan religions of their Canaanite neighbors. If they obey their covenant Lord, the people of Israel will continue to receive God’s blessings. But if they deviate from God’s ways, they will come under the covenant curses.

We return to our series on the Book of Joshua. Lord willing, we will wrap up our study of Joshua next Sunday before turning our attention to the Book of Judges. As we have seen, Joshua is now an old man. It is his duty as covenant mediator to give a kind of “state of Israel” address before he goes to be with the LORD. The final two chapters of Joshua are exactly that—the covenant mediator’s words of blessing and warning of curse to his people. As emphatically as he can, Joshua reminds the people of Israel of the fundamental structure of their national covenant with YHWH. There are blessings for obedience and there are curses threatened for disobedience. If Israel obeys the covenant, they will remain in the land and they will continue to live in prosperity. But if Israel disobeys the covenant, the people risk being cast out of the land of Canaan and the LORD will withhold his blessing. Let Israel never forget that big figs and grapes, the blessing of many children, herds and flocks, as well as peace with their pagan neighbors are gifts from God and fruit of the nation’s obedience.

The biggest threat to Israel is not that an enemy will come and defeat them—although that will eventually come to pass. The biggest threat to Israel is that people will lose their love for YHWH, that they’ll be attracted to pagan “gods” and pagan forms of worship, and that they will cease obeying God’s law, thereby subjecting themselves to the covenant curses. In fact, by the time we get to Judges 2:11 we will read these sad words, “*And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD and served the Baals.*” Not only was Joshua about to die, but so were many of that generation living at the time of the conquest. It was the children of this generation who start Israel down the road toward unbelief, apostasy and ruin. The question about how we pass our faith on to our children, as well as how we remain faithful to God while surrounded by pagans, becomes the application we draw from here on out. It is one thing to capture the land and drive out the Canaanites, it is another to be faithful to God across the generations when there are so many temptations to worship and serve other gods and to marry outside the faith of Israel. This will be Israel’s struggle. It is also ours.

As Joshua gives these final words to Israel regarding the blessing-curse principle, and as he speaks about the future of Israel, his warnings are pointed and direct. The nation of Israel stands at another critical moment in its history. Those who hear Joshua’s words must choose what the future will hold for them, which is why it is so important that Joshua warn the people of the consequences of this critical decision.

There are blessings to be received and there is the inevitability of covenant curse for disobedience.

Given the importance of this blessing/curse principle, I have been emphasizing two things in this series. First, the covenant God made with Israel at Mount Sinai, does not annul or replace the earlier covenant God made with Abraham. Confusing these covenants (the Abrahamic—the covenant of grace; and the Sinaitic—the works based covenant God made with as a nation) is a mistake that Jews will make later on, so that groups like the Judaizers see circumcision as not a sign and seal of the covenant of grace, but as something tied to the blessing/curse principle. The Judaizers believed that circumcision was meritorious and something we must do to be saved. On the contrary, in the Abrahamic covenant—the first historical manifestation of the covenant of grace—those who look to God in faith to provide for the forgiveness of their sins, will indeed be numbered among God’s people and receive their eternal inheritance. Through the eyes of faith they understand that the beauty and bounty of Canaan is but a faint glimpse of what awaits God’s people in heaven. But the covenant God made with Israel at Mount Sinai, however, is based upon the works principle and the people of Israel will be blessed or cursed as a nation, depending upon whether or not they are obedient to the covenant. The Sinaitic covenant is therefore, an entirely different kind of covenant than the Abrahamic covenant and we must keep them distinct.

The second thing I have been emphasizing is that the generation who entered the promised land under the leadership of Joshua, in a sense, serves as the high-water mark in terms of Israel’s faithfulness to the Lord. That generation which left Egypt complained about everything. They doubted that YHWH could keep his promise to give them the land of Canaan and to grant them victory over the Canaanites. Because of their unbelief, that generation was forced to wander throughout the Sinai desert for forty years. But the next generation, those born in the desert after Israel left Egypt, and who were living at the time of the Conquest and who entered Canaan with Joshua, they believed God could do as he promised. These were the people who renewed the covenant and were circumcised, who built an altar at Gilgal commemorating the crossing of the Jordan River, who celebrated the Passover in Canaan and who ate the produce of the land, instead of manna. These were the people who renewed the covenant at Shechem and who put Achan to death for violating God’s express command to not take anything from the ruins of Jericho. These are the people (and their children) to whom Joshua is speaking. But it is their children about whom we read in Judges, they “*did not know the LORD or the work he had done for Israel.*” Therefore, it falls to Joshua to warn Israel of the covenant curses, as well as point them ahead to the glories of what could be. Over time, Joshua’s message was forgotten and Israel will find itself coming under curse.

**A**s so as we turn to our text in Joshua 23:1-16, Joshua, in his office as covenant mediator, will now call Israel to remain faithful to YHWH, their covenant LORD. He will recount all of the good things God has done and then warn Israel of the covenant curses.

Before we proceed, notice that Joshua’s speech to Israel is divided into two parts. In verses 2-11, Joshua first reminds the leaders of Israel all that which YHWH has done for them. Then, in verses 12-16, Joshua will spell out those covenant curses which will come upon Israel should they turn their backs upon YHWH and worship and serve other gods. One more thing we need to notice is that the time frame for this speech is spelled out in verse 1 where we read. “*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 . . .*”

The timing is difficult to pin down. We know from earlier in the book (Joshua 13:1) Joshua was now getting up in years and that he was 110 when he eventually died (24:29). Joshua states in this farewell address that he is about to “go the way of all the earth” (speaking of his death) so it was likely that this speech was given at the end of his life, and that he knew that he was soon to die. Most commentators

believe that the phrase “a long time afterward” is not a reference to Israel’s entrance into Canaan when they crossed the Jordan, but rather refers to all that has preceded, including the potential civil war between the tribes of in Israel as recounted in the previous chapter (twenty-three). This means that Israel had been in the land and at rest for some time and that Joshua’s generation was starting to die off. If Joshua was close in age to Caleb, and Caleb was eighty-five when the land was distributed (Joshua 13:1), since Joshua was 110 when he died, then Joshua’s farewell speech comes approximately 25 years later.<sup>1</sup>

As for the speech itself, it was delivered to all the leaders of Israel, who would in turn take Joshua’s words to all the people. As we read in verse 2, “*Joshua summoned all Israel, its elders and heads, its judges and officers.* These men would be the people’s representatives in any covenant renewal ceremony. Recall that when Moses and Joshua spoke to the people previously while they were still camped on the plains of Moab waiting to enter Canaan, the focus in those speeches (especially in Moses’ farewell speech in Deuteronomy) was upon that which God had promised to give Israel, if only they obey the Lord and his covenant. Now, at the end of his life many years later, Joshua’s focus falls upon all that God has done for Israel because they have obeyed the covenant. This is, of course, the reason why the people of Israel should continue to obey. God does as he promises. He remains faithful, even when his people do not. His people have enjoyed the prosperity of Canaan. They have now lived in Canaan for some time, at peace, on their own land. But new challenges lie ahead. They must heed Joshua’s words.

Having assembled together all of Israel’s elders, heads of families, judges and officers, Joshua says to them, “*I am now old and well advanced in years.*” In other words, Joshua is giving them his “goodbye.” This gives a rather solemn tone to what follows. This is a poignant moment because Joshua has led most of these men into battle on many occasions. He has been their leader and they have been his soldiers. They are a band of brothers, to use a popular metaphor.

Joshua begins his farewell by reminding the leaders of Israel of all that has happened in their lifetimes, “*And you have seen all that the LORD your God has done to all these nations for your sake, for it is the LORD your God who has fought for you.*” These men have been eyewitnesses to many an amazing military victory over Canaanite tribes who were, supposedly, the fiercest of warriors. These men had seen the walls of Jericho miraculously collapse when that seventh trumpet sounded. They saw the Jordan River miraculously stop flowing, so that they could walk through the river bed on dry ground and into Canaan itself. They had eaten manna and quail for many a meal, and no doubt could recount how good it felt to finally eat from the bounty of Canaan. Once the Conquest was over and the land divided among the twelve tribes, they knew what a blessing it had been to be at peace and rest, and how wonderful it was to raise their crops and animals on their own lands, no longer as wandering nomads. They knew what it was to drink from wells they did not dig, and live in homes they did not build. These men have seen some amazing things. God’s faithfulness is the foundation for everything. The LORD *your* God has done this for *your* sake, says Joshua.

In verses 4-5 Joshua now reminds them all of the role he has played in all of this and how there is still much work for the people of Israel to do in ensuring that all of the land promised to Israel is occupied—something which still, apparently, has not been completely accomplished. “*Behold, I have allotted to you as an inheritance for your tribes those nations that remain, along with all the nations that I have 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*

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<sup>1</sup> Howard, *Joshua*, 419-429.

*your God promised you.*” Having been the one to divide the land, Joshua speaks of his own role in the conquest when he speaks of the nations that “I” have cut off. We know from the next sentence that Joshua ultimately attributes his success to the LORD continuing to push the Canaanites out of the land, so we know that Joshua is not bragging, as much as reflecting upon his role in what had happened. And yet in Joshua’s words there is the admission (and perhaps the warning) that the people of Israel still need to finish occupying all of the land promised to them by YHWH. Allowing these nations to remain where they were (and still exerting an influence upon Israel), keeps the threat of paganism ever near.<sup>2</sup> That is why Joshua exhorts the people to drive them out of their sight.

In verses 6-8, Joshua reiterates those things about which YHWH had warned Israel—especially the consequences of turning to false religion. *“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 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.”* Here we see the blessing/curse principle as clear as can be. To continue to receive God’s blessing, Israel must be strong, obey the terms of the covenant (set out in the Law of Moses—the Book of Deuteronomy), and not turn to one side or the other (left or right). Joshua’s point is that the Israelites are in no sense to be involved with their pagan neighbors and their religious practices. They must not mix with their pagan neighbors, because whenever they do the people of Israel will not bring pagans to faith in YHWH, but it will be the pagans who convert the people of Israel to paganism.

This will be something with which Israel struggles for the rest of its existence. By the time we get to Judges 2, the people are already being enticed to worship Baal. We read in 1 Kings 11 that Solomon’s downfall comes from the fact that he was in love with many foreign women. The problem wasn’t with their ethnicity, but that they did not worship YHWH. This caused the fall of the Northern Kingdom as recounted in 2 Kings 17, as well as the Southern Kingdom (Judah) as recounted in 2 Kings 21. Even when Israel returns to the land after the exile in Babylon, we will read in Ezra 9 and Nehemiah 13, that the people still are fascinated with pagan gods.<sup>3</sup> Since Joshua speaks forth these words as a warning hundreds of years before this comes to pass, sadly, they become a prophecy. This is why Joshua commands the Israelites to cling (literally “hold fast”) to YHWH. Only by clinging to their covenant LORD and his word, could the people fight off this pull toward pagan people and their “gods.”

In verses 9-11, Once again Joshua reminds the leaders of Israel of all that YHWH has done for them. *“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 is the LORD your God who fights for you, just as he promised you. Be very careful, therefore, to love the LORD your God.”* Israel’s obedience to YHWH is based upon YHWH’s prior faithfulness to Israel in keeping his promise to them. As the people of Israel consider their future they only need to look at their recent past. YHWH had promised to cast out the Canaanites and give Israel victory over them. And he has done exactly that—the Canaanite warriors fled before a single Israelite soldier. Why? YHWH fights for Israel.

Because of his track record of keeping his promises, the people of Israel must love the LORD their God. This love for God lies at the very heart of everything else we do. The only true and living God, the

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<sup>2</sup> Howard, *Joshua*, 420-421.

<sup>3</sup> Howard, *Joshua*, 422.

creator and sustainer of all things, has set his love and affection upon the people of Israel. It was YHWH who called Abraham. It was YHWH who delivered his people from their bondage and slavery in Egypt. It was YHWH who brought them to the land of promise and gave them title to the land. In light of YHWH's electing love for Israel, Israel must be careful to love YHWH. After all, this is the very summary of the law and Israel's confession of faith as found in the famous Shema. *"Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might."* This is almost identical to our Lord's summary of the law, as given in Matthew 22:37-39. *"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself."* YHWH is love. He loves his people and our response to is love him in turn.

YHWH's love for his people and his desire that Israel love him as well, is the basis for what follows. The surest sign that the people of Israel are rejecting YHWH's love and favor is when the nation commits spiritual adultery by cheating on him—embracing other "gods" (the false "gods") of the pagans around them. With this in mind comes the solemn warning found in the second part of Joshua's speech in verses 12-13. *"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 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."* Because YHWH loves Israel, he knows that they must cast out those Canaanites who still remain in the land. He knows that his people are sinful and that they will be pulled in the direction of sinful things and false gods.

The choice before Israel is a simple. Worship and serve the God who loved them, delivered them and who gives them the blessings of the land of Canaan, or reject him by not casting the Canaanites from the land thereby allowing a bunch of pagans to influence the future course of Israel. When Joshua speaks of the nations around Israel setting "a snare" and a "trap," he's referring to fact that just as what happened on the plains of Moab when the Israelites found themselves attracted to pagans and married them, it won't be long before the people of Israel become pagans if this is tolerated. While those listening to Joshua this day took these words seriously, slowly but surely, over time, these words fall into the distant past and the good intentions of this day become long since forgotten. But YHWH neither forgets nor changes his will. In that day—which starts in the opening chapters of the Book of Judges—in which the people of Israel begin to commit spiritual adultery, YHWH's covenant curses will indeed begin to fall upon Israel generations down the road. One day, Israel will lose this land, as they find themselves hauled off into captivity in Babylon and then again when they are dispersed into the four corners of the earth after the Romans sack Jerusalem and destroy the temple in A.D. 70.

As Joshua explains that his time has come in verse 14, he leaves Israel with yet another admonition in verses 15-16. *"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 commanded you, and 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."*

As indicated in verse 14, Joshua knew he was near death. He wants to leave his people with the reminder

that God had done everything for Israel he promised to do. All those standing there knew it. Every promise God made has come to pass. Not one has failed. Israel has enjoyed all the blessings God has promised. But there are two sides to the covenant—blessing and curse. So Joshua also admonishes his people, that Lord will bring down the covenant curses upon Israel, if the people transgress the covenant. And the way in which they will do that is by worshiping and serving other so called “gods.” Should that come to pass (and we know that it will), Israel will be removed from the land. That is why God will send a whole series of prophets, who will come and repeatedly bring God’s charges against his people. Just as Joshua does here, God warns Israel time and time again. YHWH is not only love, he is patient and long-suffering with his people. Joshua warns the people of Israel that YHWH is a jealous God and that his anger will be kindled and he will dispense the covenant curses and Israel will be removed from the land. Joshua is saying “farewell.” And he’s warning Israel about the future course of the nation.

As we wrap up, what is there for us in this passage by way of application?

Since we live in the New Covenant era and that covenant God made with Israel at Mount Sinai has passed way, we begin by pointing out that the blessing/curse principle has been fulfilled by Jesus Christ, the greater Joshua, whose death upon the cross satisfies God’s wrath toward our many sins. To put another way, we need not fear being cast out of the land and not receiving our inheritance, precisely because Jesus was cast out for us when he was forsaken on the cross. Furthermore, Christ’s perfect obedience to the law of God is reckoned as ours through faith. This means that God regards us as righteous for the sake of his own son. Therefore we will receive the promised inheritance in heaven. In every way, the New Covenant is better than the covenant God made with Israel at Mount Sinai. As heroic as Joshua was, Jesus is a much better mediator of a much better covenant (the New Covenant).

Because Jesus loved his father perfectly and fulfilled the commandment to love God and neighbor for us and in our place, we have now access to the Father through Jesus that Israel never enjoyed. Furthermore, God sent his spirit into our hearts to pour out his love upon us. And so this love of God in Christ is the basis then for our fidelity to God under the New Covenant. Because of what God has done for us in Christ, we are likewise commanded to remain faithful to our covenant head (Jesus) because of what he has done for us—guilt, grace, gratitude. This is why Paul can tell us (in our New Testament lesson), *“do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever? What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, ‘I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing; then I will welcome you, and I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty.’ Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God.”*

If we are Christ’s, then we cannot be Belial’s. Because God has given to us these glorious promises, Christians cannot then turn around and mock them by marrying non-Christians. Nor can we mock God’s promise by participating in anything which leads to idolatry. Paul’s point is that we cannot go through life naively thinking that non-Christians and non-Christian religions are benign and of no threat to our faith. That said, we know from what he says elsewhere that Paul is not telling us to avoid all contact with non-Christians. Rather, he is warning us—just as Joshua warned Israel—of the dangers of idolatry. And one of the ways a Christian can fall into idolatry, is to marry a non-Christian. The other way we can do this is to tolerate pagan ways of thinking and doing. And this we cannot do.

Just as Joshua warned Israel, so too Paul warns Christians, that in light of all the good things that the LORD your God has promised to you in Christ, why on earth would you want to turn your back on him and shun his love by committing spiritual adultery, either through embracing a pagan religion or through marrying a non-Christian? To do so is to mock the very promise of God. God freely gives us all things in Christ. He has saved us from our sins and given us a perfect righteousness. And he also warns us that as Christians we will still be attracted to things which lead to disaster. Israel was instructed to “remember all the good things that the LORD God promised.” Christians are instructed that “we are not to be unequalled yoked with unbelievers.” Why, because we are the bride of Christ, who loved us and gave himself for us. He laid down his life for us. How then can we turn our backs on him?