

Parting Words to Direct Our Path

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Joshua 23 - 24

What would your parting words be to your children or grandchildren if you knew they were the last words you would share with them? I suspect there are innumerable people around the world who faced that very question as they suspected they had contracted Covid-19 and headed to the hospital for treatment thinking they may never come home again. Or once in hospital, before being put on a ventilator or in an induced comma, they made one last phone call in which they shared what may have been their last words. Others who have been diagnosed with a very aggressive terminal illness are faced with saying their final words while they remain lucid; some put their words in the form of a final letter. Have you considered what your parting words would be?

Years after Joshua led the nation of Israel across the River Jordan and they completed their conquest of Canaan, Joshua realized his days on earth were numbered and it was time to share his parting words with Israel. We are introduced to the occasion this way. "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, Joshua summoned all Israel, its elders and heads, its judges and officers, and said to them, 'I am now old and well advanced in years.'" (Joshua 23:1-2, ESV).

Joshua assembled the people at *Shechem* not far from where they had camped on the *Plains of Gilgal* years earlier. It was at *Shechem*, hundreds of years earlier where Abraham had pitched his tent and built his first altar to the Lord and where the Lord had promised to give him the land of Canaan. It was also at *Shechem*, between *Mt. Ebal* and *Mt. Gerizim*, where, following their victory at *Ai* that Israel renewed their commitment to serve the Lord. Hence, it was fitting to meet at that historic place for this final address.

He began by reminding them that the Lord had conquered the Canaanites by fighting for them (23.3) and in the future He would push out the remaining tribes (23.4-5). It is beneficial to remind people how they got where they are to ensure an accurate understanding of history. A more comprehensive review of their journey is found in chapter 24 where Joshua traced their history from God's call on Abraham when he lived beyond the Euphrates (24.2), to Canaan (24.3), to Egypt (24.4), to the exodus from Egypt (24.5). He reminded them of God's miraculous deliverance at the Red Sea (24.6-7) and after 40 years in the wilderness He repeated a similar miracle when they crossed the River Jordan (24.8-11). That was followed by them occupying Canaan (24.12-13). They were the chosen generation to experience the fulfillment of God's promise made about 700 years earlier to Abraham. The blessings they had received were unparalleled. The future was now before them, and they would determine what it would look like. How could they ensure the blessings they enjoyed would continue to the next generation?

The curtain on Joshua's life was about to close, but before it did, Joshua gave his final direction to the nation of Israel on how they might align their future with God's desire for them and successive generations. Joshua had enough experience to understand the challenges that lay ahead, the temptations they would face, and the choices they would need to make to avoid being derailed from God's plan.

Know the Path to Follow

Most people not only desire to have the basics of food, clothing, and shelter, but to live in peace and lead productive and fulfilling lives. Few want to be surrounded by turmoil, or worse the constant threat of violence and destruction. Quite simply, people want to have good health and be safe and secure. That was the experience of Israel – “the Lord had given rest to Israel from all their surrounding enemies” (Joshua 23:1b, ESV). Joshua’s desire was for that to continue to be the case; that they would continue to have rest and enjoy the favor of the Lord. No one could stand against God’s people; the reason was very simple; they had a tremendous advantage over their enemies – God fought for them. He intervened for them and He was the reason for their success! Joshua knew the continued favor of the Lord upon them was contingent on Israel following the right path, which of course meant there must be no ambiguity or misunderstanding about what that path was.

Joshua outlined three nonnegotiable ingredients for the continued blessing by God:

1. **Obey the Word of God** – follow “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” (Joshua 23:6, ESV). God had given them His Law at Mt. Sinai. The Word of God provides much insight into who God is and His attributes. It describes God’s creation of the universe which concluded with His creation of Adam and Eve in His own image, the pinnacle of His creation. Despite the pristine nature of God’s creation, Adam and Eve disobeyed God and in so doing they plunged all humanity and creation into bondage to sin. The depravity of humankind was evidenced in innumerable ways and reached an intolerable state of wickedness bringing about God’s judgment with a universal flood from which only Noah and his family survived. Unfolded in the Law is not only the need for redemption from sin, but God’s promises and provisions for a Redeemer to restore a right relationship with Him. Further, God’s Word outlines how people can please the Lord, as well as identifying beliefs and behaviour that do not. Delineated are blessings God would bestow on Israel for right behaviour, as well as the curses that would befall them if they rejected Him.

Walking in a manner that pleases the Lord is a central theme throughout both the Old and New Testaments. While we no longer bound are by the *Ceremonial Law* which was fulfilled by Jesus Christ when He laid down His life at Calvary, nor by the civil aspect of the Law which has largely been supplanted by our civil authorities, God remains equally concerned about righteous behavior and moral conduct. If anything, the New Testament raises the standard higher; for example, not only are we commanded not to murder someone, but we should not even be angry with another. Instead, our attitude towards others is to be loving (Matthew 5:21-22, 43-46). The New Testament message parallels the Old Testament emphasis to obey the Lord and do what pleases Him, rather than walk as the world walks. We are to walk in newness of life in a God-honoring manner by making choices the Lord commends. To that end we have been given the Scriptures which Joshua emphasized God’s people follow. Reflect on the penetrating clarity of the Word of God which is described in the familiar words of,

2 Timothy 3:16–17 (ESV) ¹⁶All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

The Word of God is indispensable to discovering the path to follow. Knowing the right path to follow necessitates a knowledge of the Word of God so that one does not turn aside *neither to the right hand nor to the left* (23.6). Joshua's parting words at Shechem were very similar to the words of exhortation he gave years earlier to the 2 ½ tribes before they crossed back over the Jordan to take possession of their inheritance on the other side. Four of the specifics Joshua emphasized in Joshua 22.5 were: observe the Word of God, walk in all His ways, keep His Commandments, and serve Him with all your heart and soul. It is impossible to overstate the critical importance of God's people making choices that are aligned with God's Word.

Joshua first emphasized what they needed to do, followed by what they must not do.

2. **Do Not Follow the World** – “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” (Joshua 23:7, ESV).

It was essential that they remain distinct from the surrounding nations and refuse to be assimilated by them. Therefore, they must not intermarry, for if they did, they would be intrigued by the religion of those they married and be drawn away by their gods. Instead, they were not to even mention the names of the gods of the surrounding nations let alone serve them or bow down to them. The Law contained warnings about the dangers of making covenants with the former inhabitants of the land (Exodus 34.12-16; Numbers 33.55-56). If they ignored those warnings, they would become entangled with their false gods and idolatry. Idolatry was a certain path to God's judgement and forfeiting His blessings. While God tolerated some indiscretions of His people, one thing He did not tolerate then, nor does He tolerate now, is pushing Him aside and replacing Him with idols or those who are nothing more than ambassadors of the world of darkness of which satan is the head. While the idolatry of Joshua's day was embodied in figures of wood, stone, and metal, something which many in our world still embrace, idolatry in our North American culture is typified by self-worship – putting oneself on the throne reserved for God.

God's warnings to His children have not changed. His counsel to those who have placed their trust in Jesus for their salvation is to “no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds” (Ephesians 4:17, ESV). The Gentiles (those who do not trust in Jesus for salvation), not only don't follow God's path, but they don't even understand what that path consists of; hence, to follow their example is a path to certain destruction (4.18-19). Thus, the direction for all of us is: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Romans 12:2, ESV). If we want to be recipients of God's blessings, we must not allow the values, standards, or priorities of the world shape the path we follow. It is very easy to unconsciously embrace a world view and behaviour that differs little from the world. Therefore, it is important to assess our priorities and practices with regularity to identify and weed out ones which conflict with the Word of God and how He would have us live. We must be very discerning in choosing who we spend a great deal of time with and who we allow to influence us. It is of course

critical that followers of Jesus Christ are careful about whom they enter into business with and make allegiances with. It of course remains critical today, just as it was in Joshua's day, that believers do not marry those who are not saved and surrendered to the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

Rather than pattern one's life after the world, true followers of the Lord, must,

3. **Cling to the Lord** – “but you shall cling to the Lord your God just as you have done to this day” (Joshua 23:8, ESV). The term, *cling*, vividly conveys the nature of the relationship of God's people to Him. To *cling* is to *stay close*, to *stick to*, to *hold fast*, to *cleave* to. In modern Hebrew, the term is used for *glue*, which pictures an inseparable bond, in this case a bond with the Lord. It is the same word used to describe the relationship of husband and wife. “Therefore, a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast [cling, be united, cleave] to his wife, and they shall become one flesh” (Genesis 2:24, ESV). The term *abide*, as used in John 15 with the image of Jesus as the true Vine, carries the same kind of inseparable and intimate relationship. Joshua's counsel to Israel was to hold fast to the Lord; keep Him in the center of their lives. When Joshua shared his parting words with the 2 ½ tribes he told them *to love the Lord your God*, also told them *to cling to Him and serve Him with all your heart and with all your soul* (Jos 22.5).

People who love the Lord and walk in close communion with Him will have a difficult time with attitudes and behaviour that conflict with the Lord's. Instead, they will desire to understand the path He wants them to follow and will follow it with all their hearts and with all their souls.

Joshua outlined for Israel the path to follow if they and successive generations were to remain recipients of God's blessing. They would need to **Obey the Word of the God, Not Follow the World**, and **Cling to the Lord**. That was what they had done thus far (23.8). However, it would require more than just **knowing** the *Path to Follow*. They needed to follow-through.

Choose to Follow That Path (24.15)

Despite the path which was clearly laid out by Moses and reaffirmed by Joshua, it would not be many years before the people of God would become entangled with the ways of the pagan nations surrounding them. Rather than follow God's Word they would do *that which seemed right in their own eyes* (Judges 17.6; 21.25). The consequences of disregarding God's path was predictable – the withdrawal of God's blessing, and instead hardship and adversity became their lot. When they confessed their sins, repented of them, and turned back to God and followed His path again, they enjoyed God's favor.

Knowing the *Path to Follow* is obviously critical, but it must be accompanied with a decision, or choice, to pursue that path. Many people know what they ought to do, but nevertheless choose not to do it. Months ago we looked at the life of Moses who was raised in Pharaoh's court where he would have learned the ways of Egypt. He enjoyed the privileges of royalty and had access to endless pleasures. But having spent his infancy and first years with his Hebrew mother, not only were his Hebrew roots instilled in him, but he learned about God's path for His people. The time came when Moses had to choose whether he would follow the magnificent and indulgent path Egypt offered him, or the path of a Hebrew slave. Moses had to choose which path he would follow.

Hebrews 11:24–25 (ESV) ²⁴By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, ²⁵choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin.

While Moses likely sensed God's convicting tug upon him, I doubt he imagined when he chose to follow God's path how it was going to unfold, but he pursued it tenaciously, one step at a time.

I often mention the critical first step in God's Path for people to follow. I do so because of its importance. The number one issue facing all humanity is the fact they are lost in sin, spiritually dead, without hope, and separated from God. God's path begins with confessing one's sin (agreeing with God's definition that it is sin), repenting of their sin, and placing their trust in Jesus Christ and His sacrifice at the cross for their sin. Those who believe the Gospel of salvation and place their trust in Jesus Christ are born-again and they will demonstrate that transformation by following God's path for them. They will progressively set aside the path of the world and replace it with God's path for them.

In many places it will be relatively easy to set aside unacceptable behavior and make God-honoring choices, but in other cases it will be more demanding. One group of people where choosing God's path can be particularly formidable is young people who decide to not follow the world. It can be a huge step to share with their non-Christian peers that they believe in God and regularly attend a Bible-believing, Christ-honoring Church. Choosing to reject the world's standards for sexual conduct, dressing modestly, using God-honoring language and behavior can result in public shaming, exclusion from the crowd, rejection, and humiliation. All of that is intensified these days with social media and the cruel and hostile behavior often used to lash out at others. We must support our young people and provide a refuge for them where they are loved and encouraged.

However, the challenges faced by a person who follows a God-honoring path isn't limited to young people but can be encountered by people of any age. It can happen in the workplace where there is a conflict of values and standards of conduct, or it can be as a person rubs shoulders with people in the community. It may require taking a stand for integrity, honesty, and morality refusing to compromise. Believers may experience ridicule or disdain for something as basic as refusing to compromise on the priority of gathering for corporate worship or participating in ministry functions when it conflicts with a recreational activity or family gathering.

Moses had to decide between the pleasures of sin and following the Lord. Let us never forget the fact that there are some things we may desire to do and which we would enjoy doing that conflict with God's standard of righteousness. It is easy to say "No" to something we don't find appealing; however, it is different to say, "No" to something we would like to do but which nevertheless constitutes compromise. The world's agenda is to divert us from following the Lord. Satan and those who serve as his ambassadors seek to derail people and render them irrelevant as believers; to make them essentially indistinguishable from those who make no profession of faith in Jesus Christ, to persuade them to follow a self-directed form of Christianity that parallels the choices described in the Book of Judges, *they did that which was right in their own eyes*. Choosing to follow a God-directed path takes on a whole new meaning when it costs us something, when we need to give up something we enjoy because it interferes with God's path for us, or we need to give up a friendship with someone because that friendship is detrimental to

our relationship with the Lord. In our world, which dismisses absolutes and clear delineations of right and wrong, there is often a price to be paid for taking a stand for righteousness.

This past week in the House of Commons, Bill C-233, a Private Members' Bill to ban sex-selective abortions, was voted on, and sadly defeated. First, it took courage on the part of Saskatchewan MP Cathay Wagantall, who represents the riding where we previously lived, to put forward a bill to ban abortion of an unborn child who is not the preferred gender. It also took courage for the 82 MP's, including our MP, James Bezan, who voted in favor of the Bill. They face the hostility of those who disregard the rights of the unborn and champion abortion for any reason whatsoever, including if the baby isn't the gender they want. It is little wonder that God should withdraw His hand of protection and blessing from our country and in its place allow evil to proliferate.

Given the challenges the people of God would face, it is understandable Joshua prefaced his exhortation to keep and do the Law of the Lord with, "**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" (Joshua 23:6, ESV). The temptation to cave in to the standards of those around them would be great; they would never be able to stand steadfast in their own strength. So it is also for all of us; we will only succeed in following God's path and rejecting the path of the world by relying on supernatural help. We must walk close to the Lord and draw upon His strength each day. Joshua appreciated the need for God's strength; his words mirror the words the Lord spoke to him after Moses died. "Only be strong and very courageous, being careful to do according to all the law that Moses my servant commanded you. Do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, that you may have good success wherever you go" (Joshua 1:7, ESV). He was passing on the counsel which had proven indispensable for him, "Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go." (Joshua 1:9, ESV). There were times Joshua felt like giving up, but he did not because of the enabling strength of the Lord.

Similarly, to stress the importance of loving the Lord, Joshua added "**Be very careful, therefore, to love the Lord your God**" (Joshua 23:11, ESV). "Loving the Lord," demanded special attention because of its critical importance. Their relationship with the Lord and their love for Him was what made them different and was essential to all their successes and the blessings bestowed on them. If they turned from the Lord, they would be far more guilty than the nations around them who served their pagan gods; they hadn't been entrusted with the oracles of God, but Israel had. That leads to the final point.

Never Turn Aside from That Path

Not only do people need to **Know the Path to Follow** and **Choose to Follow That Path**, but they must not grow weary or disheartened and give up. They must follow that path tenaciously and unreservedly, refusing to turn back or compromise, even when the price to do so is high. How we began is not as important as how we end. Many a person has made some terrible decisions along the way, but thereafter decided to get on track and pursued that new path to the end. That's what genuine conversion is all about; it's about starting over and pursuing God's path in His strength. A distinction of Biblical Christianity is that it always offers hope. God always extends forgiveness to a sinner and offers them grace to walk with Him.

Some fear an emphasis on righteous living can become very legalistic and rigid. However, that will not be the case where it flows from an abiding relationship with the Lord; where a person

clings to the Lord, loves Him deeply, and seeks to walk in all His ways and serve Him with all his/her heart and soul. Joshua began to wrap up his exhortation with “Now therefore fear the Lord and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness. Put away the gods that your fathers served beyond the *River* and in Egypt, and serve the Lord” (Joshua 24:14, ESV). People who fear the Lord, who have a regard for who He is and their accountability to Him, serving Him flows from their personal relationship with Him and they do so with sincerity and in faithfulness, not in a rigid and legalistic manner. Because God’s people fear the Lord and serve Him in sincerity and in faithfulness, they persevere recognizing the encouragement of Scripture to do so:

Romans 5:3–5 (ESV) ³Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁴and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

James 1:3–4 (ESV) ³for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. ⁴And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

Conclusion

At the conclusion of Joshua’s address, he challenged the people to decide that day whom they would serve – the Lord or the pagan gods their fathers had served in Egypt. God created people with the inherent inclination to worship someone or something. Joshua in no way affirmed the acceptability of worshipping a false god; however, he knew that if they rejected serving the true God, they would end up serving pagan idols.

Joshua 24:15 (ESV) ¹⁵And if it is evil in your eyes to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”

Joshua had no doubt about whom He would serve; he would continue to serve the Lord. The people echoed their choice to serve the Lord as well. It was He who brought them out of Egypt and delivered the land to them (Joshua 24.16-18). Joshua warned them about failing to follow-through with their commitment, but they assured him they would not fail. As a witness to their covenant to serve the Lord, they erected the final *standing stone* in the Book of Joshua. That standing stone bore testimony to their commitment to serve the Lord. We don’t erect standing stones to serve as witnesses to our covenants with the Lord. Standing instead as witnesses today are professions of faith people make when they are saved and baptized, when they recite Church Covenants to the Community of Saints, or when they become members of a Church, all of which are reminders to follow God’s Path.

I can think of few more pertinent parting words to leave with the next generation than an encouragement *to fear the Lord and serve Him in sincerity and in faithfulness* (24.14). At the end of the day, no accomplishment a person makes or success they enjoy during their earthly sojourn is of any value unless they walk with the Lord.

The clear and straightforward song, **I Have Decided to Follow Jesus**, sung by Cedarhurst Kids, is a fitting one to conclude with.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L9h9UjlkMM&ab_channel=EasyWorshipResources