

Leadership Resolved

Joshua 23

Introduction: *Last words.* They are a gift to those who have time to think through and deliver what they know is their last. They are a culmination of life's experiences, the most important things that a person wants to pass along. When a parent, spouse, sibling, or anyone close has an opportunity to leave nothing left unsaid, it is a gift that lasts. There have been some who have had less than memorable last words:

Winston Churchill – “I’m so bored with it all” *before slipping into a coma and dying 9 days later*

George Armstrong Custer – “Hurrah boys! Lets get these last few reds, then head back to camp. Hurrah” – before, you know, he did not go back to camp

Steve Irwin – “Don’t worry, they usually don’t swim backwards”...“I’m dying” while swimming with stingrays in the Great Barrier Reef

We tend to listen more when someone is at the end. This is where we find Joshua at the end the book. There are about 20-23 years that have passed between Joshua 22 and 23, and Joshua is at the end of his life. This is his final charge, a final call to what is most important to him and to the people. He gathered all the people together, and ch. 23 recounts his counsel to the leaders of the people, while 24 was given to ALL the people. What is interesting about this charge is that it is given as a way to perpetuate leadership, to sustain a movement that was started, and to find lasting success. It is often much easier to **start** a venture than to **sustain and perpetuate one**. Business start up is one thing, but building a business model that will last is another. Church planting comes at a cost, but sustaining a faithful church that passes generations is truly challenging. Joshua understood this. He knew that perseverance was not simply imperative to our life in God (see the parable of the sower in Mark 4:5, 16-17), but also in leadership. We have said a phrase here that “success without a successor is failure”, so our goal is not simply to build something for now but something that will be found faithful decade after decade. Obviously, this is a huge challenge, and thus Joshua spent specific time detailing to the leadership of the nation **how** they would find sustained success. This would be accomplished by **looking to the past, committing in the present, trusting the character of God, and fighting against the alternative.**

I. **Persevering leadership is assured by the past (1-5)**

Joshua 23:3-5 *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.* ⁴ *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.* ⁵ ***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 your God promised you.***

A. **Our faith is grounded in past acts of God**

Notice where Joshua starts his challenge to his leaders. He starts with what God has accomplished among them up until this point in their past. He laid out His 1) military victories 2) partitioning the land and 3) the completion of the settlement of the land. These were things that they would have all **seen** with their own eyes, as they were probably younger men when these things took place. There would undoubtedly be successive generations who would not have seen these feats, so it was that much more important for the leadership to remember. There are two principles that we learn from this:

- **Faith helps us define the role of feelings vs. knowledge** – We can easily get overwhelmed with our present circumstances and situations. When we look at what’s happening in our life at any one point, we can go down a path of **anxiety, stress, and fear**. These are attributed to the fact that we stop living by faith and live instead by sight, and what we see seems impossible to deal with. Joshua’s charge was to remember the work of God in the past and let that **knowledge inform ones feelings**. In other words, faith is not some fairy tale, make believe, mystical voodoo that we close our eyes and hope everything will work out. No, our faith finds assurance that God has worked in the past, has never broken a promise, and thus we can trust Him moving forward.
- **Faith is never a simple “leap into darkness”** - This is why it is so important to understand that the truth of God’s Word is literal, sufficient, and authoritative. The things that are written and told in Scripture are true, they really happened, and are not made up stories, poems, or legends borrowed from Ancient Near East literature. We have a record of God’s faithfulness that we can point to and allow us to walk by faith in the future, even though we cannot see what is to come.

B. Our faith is emboldened by faith in future grace

This faith is the impetus given to continue to possess the land that was promised. God has poured out His grace in the past, and we trust that He will continue to pour out His grace in the future. This is why we believe that whatever situation we find ourselves in, whatever struggle we are going through, whatever turbulence in our marriage or question in our parenting, we believe that God will continue to give us the grace we need to bear up under and walk obediently. But how do we continue to walk by faith in future grace?

- **Know your Bible** – This is one of the reasons that we study God’s Word so extensively, and why every book matters. This is a log, a record of God’s promises, faithfulness, and plan. We not only know the beginning, but we know the end. We know that nothing can truly be taken from us, and have bold confidence that we can live out the roles that God has called us to.
- **Remember your testimony** – This is where we focus on big “T” and little “t” testimony. We have our Testimony of how God saved us from our sin and His wrath, and the first time He allowed us to place our trust in Him. But we also have an ongoing testimony of God’s faithfulness day in and day out. This is what we oftentimes forget. We forget that when money is tight and we don’t know how we are going to make it in the future, we remember that He has sustained us this far. When we are not sure how we will overcome the current conflict in our marriage, we remember that God has called us to love and be faithful, and how He continues to keep our marriage together.

Do you take time to reflect on the past grace of God? Do you take time to thank God for what He has accomplished in the past, and ask that He continue to give you grace in the future? What would be different about your attitude in trials if you were emboldened by faith in future grace?

II. **Persevering leadership assumes obedience in the present (6-8; 11)**

A. Leadership seeks Radical yielding to God’s Word

Joshua 23:6-8 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,⁷ 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,⁸ but you **shall cling to the LORD your God** just as you have done to this day.

- **Reading, studying, and practicing God's Word is a means by which we cling to God** – Joshua was consistent in his message of success: *know, keep, and do all that God has called us to do in His Word*. Joshua started with this premise and never moved away from it in his older age. Joshua's passion was not to become a well known general, an accomplished military hero, or a world renowned leader. Those things were results of something else that he committed too. If all of our life is to be about worship, to make much of God and His glory, the only way to truly accomplish that end is to cling to God, our greatest joy, by clinging to His Word. This seems almost too simple, but is so easily missed. We say we want to know God and be known by Him, and the ONLY way to accomplish that is to stay committed to His Word.
- **Reading, studying, and practicing God's Word keeps us from insidious idolatry** - Joshua gave that charge to leaders who would face living in the midst of people who would practice life and worship differently. There would ALWAYS be a pull, a call away from the living and true God. Just like today, where idolatry and adultery of our heart run rampant, the solution is to flood our mind and flush our heart with truth from God's Word. The drift away from these things is **ALWAYS SUBTLE**. I can't tell you how many conversations I have had over the years (some with myself) that are similar. There is a spiritual dryness and depression, a drift into sin that we never thought would be possible, and a lack of desire to worship. When diagnosing the problem, there is incredible consistency: there is a lack of time with God in **prayer, in His Word, and lack of corporate worship**. Idolatry takes root when we find God-replacements and delight in those things (even "good" things) more than Him. The way that we navigate an idolatrous culture is by clinging hard to God and latching ourselves to His Word.

B. Leadership strives for Radical Love of God

Joshua 23:11 *Be very careful, therefore, to love the LORD your God.*

In a simple yet profound statement, Joshua encapsulated the marrow of living life with God. We are to be careful, to be diligent, to take heed of loving God. This is anything but a passive exercise, and must be sought after, cultivated, and examined constantly. In missing this step, all else would fall and fail. Obedience would simply be a moralistic exercise leading to slavery and a joyless pharisaical act that would not please the Lord. There are a few things to keep in mind if we are going to be careful to love God truly:

- **Love and obedience cannot be separated** – Jesus said, *"If you love me, you will keep my commandments. (John 14:15)"* In the context of this statement, fidelity to the whole counsel of Scripture was necessary for purity, and purity is necessary for love to be true. To say, "I just want to love Jesus, but not get into the nitty gritty of His Word" is a false dichotomy. We cannot love God unless we know Him, and if we know Him, we will keep His commands (1 John 2:3)
- **Our love for God is based on His love for us** – Do not miss this point. We love Him because He first loved us (1 John 4:19). His love is constant, never changing, and unrelenting. We are careful to love because we know God is constant in His love for us.
- **Our love can grow or fade depending on our attention to it** – We all want to feel. We all want to feel deeply about life, God, and others. We want to respond out of affection and joy rather than duty and obligation. I want that in my marriage and relationship with God. The truth about both of these relationships is the same. I can cultivate growing love and affection by giving attention to both relationships. In other words, the more I pursue my wife (since we are

already married), the more I think about her, the more I dwell on her character and attributes, a strange thing happens: my affection and desire for her grows. The same happens for us with our love for God. We must be careful to pursue God alone because we know how wayward our heart can be. Without constant attention we open ourselves up to other lovers, committing adultery in both relationships. This is why we must be diligent to give attention to our love of God.

III. **Persevering leadership finds its ability in God's character (9-10; 12-13)**

A. Leadership knows the power of God's Grace

Joshua 23:9-10 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. ¹⁰ 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.

Past grace allows us to put our faith in God's future grace. Living by God's grace allows us to live by faith (which is the only way to please God) and joy, because we know that God will give us the power to walk in delight NO MATTER THE CIRCUMSTANCE. When we live by faith in future grace we are free to live in light of His promises rather than our own strength.

B. Leadership takes pause of God's Fear

Joshua 23:12-13 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, ¹³ 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.

God does not play favorites and does not whine for us to notice Him. He demands that we **cling to Him, to obey Him, and follow Him**. When we do that, He is the fountain of all goodness to us. But we are constantly reminded that He wants us all, and wants all of us. The people were going to be influenced to follow after the gods and practices of the nations around them, seduced away from God by the siren call of what could be seen, experienced, and enjoyed in the immediate. **Intermarriage** was always an issue (as Solomon found out – 2 Kings 11:4) because marriage is about intimacy, and foreign marriages moved hearts away from God. God did not mince words: **IF THAT HAPPENED, blessings would become curses and a good land would become a curse.**

This is highly instructive for us today. It is not about inter-racial or inter-cultural marriage that is the issue, but it absolutely has to do with us playing with fire in our culture. We must be constant in our examination of our heart as to what we are pursuing. Are we trying to be LIKE the world, are we pursuing what they are, seeking joy or happiness or contentment or satisfaction in the same way, or are we interacting with the world as we continually worship and yield ourselves to the LORD? **Are there areas of your life that are so intertwined with the world that you would feel devastated if you had to give it up?** *If you do, you have crossed the line to idolatry and you must consider the fear of the Lord.*

IV. **Persevering leadership fights any alternative (14-16)**

Joshua 23:15 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**, ¹⁶ 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."

A. Leadership fights to believe the goodness of God

Sometimes its hard to see God as good (although even that statement seems strange to actually read). I remember talking about the goodness of God with my friend Matt in college when his girlfriend broke up with him (they later got married). We talked about Jeremiah 32:39-41 where God spoke to His people in exile that there would be day to come that God would do good to His people, would plant them in the land of promise, and He would do that with **all His heart and soul**. In other words, God put His people through extremely tough times to teach them to fear Him so that He would be able to do them ultimate good.

Joshua appeals to this goodness. God is by nature good and acts on that goodness (see Psalm 34:8; 84:11; 100:5; 103:5). He desired to do people good, not harm, but would not stand for the transgression of His covenant. Leaders understand and live in light of the goodness of God.

B. Leadership fights against kindling the anger of God

Just as we trust God to keep His promises to us, so we must trust that He will keep His warnings to us. God never utters idle threats. He means what He says and says what He means. Just as God desired to do all kind of good to and for His people, He was equally committed to 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."*** We don't tend to like this God as much, but we must remember that God upholds His justice and His love equally.

Joshua left this negative statement with his leaders. This was not an artificially bloated victory speech. This was as real as it gets. Joshua knew, all too well, that God does not mess around and does not say things lightly.

So we are left with this. Do we want to see a model of leadership that can perpetuate? Do we want to see generation after generation stand up in the midst of their culture and love God, love others, and bring the gospel to bear to a people that don't even know they need it? It begins with those that stand up to lead, those willing to call others to follow. Its trusting the past grace of God and living by faith in future grace. It is seeking to obey and love God with our whole heart by faith. And it is to understand the grace and fear of the Lord to avoid his anger and enjoy His goodness. The issue here and next week comes down to a dangerous word: **choice**. Are we going to choose to follow or choose another? I want us all to think about the choices we have made in our life, in the last days but also the last years, and ask honestly if they reflect God as our greatest joy or reflect something else. That examination will tell us everything we need to know about our future.