

UNIT 1: JOSHUA AND JUDGES

Lesson 4

Joshua's Final Challenge: Covenant Renewal

God is always faithful to His covenant.

THE LESSON OVERVIEW

This lesson studies the words of instruction from Joshua to Israel before his death, followed by God's review of His protective hand upon Israel from Abraham to that moment. This included the renewed commitment of the people to God's covenant with them. Joshua kept the focus for their success on the Lord. Only briefly did he mention his role in their conquest of the land. God rightfully pointed to His grace in choosing Abraham, the son of an idol worshiper, to be the forefather of His people. Through it all, God's grace prevailed over the people's failures to provide them with a future. Last, Joshua challenged the people to serve the Lord faithfully.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Joshua 23 is essentially Joshua's farewell sermon, yet he kept the focus on God. Eighteen times, he used the phrase "*the LORD your God*" (*Yahweh Elohim*), and four times, he referred to "*the LORD*" (*Yahweh*). A number of years after Canaan had been conquered and the land allotted to the tribes, Joshua recognized his season was ending. He had been an effective leader, faithfully following God's will in bringing Israel to this point, but he used the first-person pronoun, *I*, only four times. In two of those references, he said his demise was near because he was old (vv. 2, 14). Only in verse 4 did he refer to his role in the conquest of Canaan, mentioning himself twice.

THE LESSON OUTLINE

1. MISSION ACCOMPLISHED; OBEDIENCE COMMANDED *Joshua 23:1-16*

- A. The End of Joshua's Journey (1-10)
- B. Joshua's Counsel for Continuing Success (11-16)

2. GOD RECALLS HIS FAITHFULNESS *Joshua 24:1-13*

- A. God's Work From Abraham to Moses (1-5)
- B. God's Work in the Wilderness (6-13)

3. CHOOSE WHOM YOU WILL SERVE *Joshua 24:14-28*

- A. The People Promise Faithfulness (14-18)
- B. Joshua Records the People's Promise (19-28)

DISCUSSING THE LESSON

1. MISSION ACCOMPLISHED; OBEDIENCE COMMANDED *Joshua 23:1–16*

A. The End of Joshua's Journey *Joshua 23:1–10*

Even great people like Joshua, full of faith and committed to God, eventually come to the end of their lives. Verse 1 states Joshua had *“waxed old and [was] stricken in age.”* Knowing his end was near (23:14), he called the nation to meet with him. He brought in the various leaders, telling them, *“I am old and advanced in years”* (v. 2 Amp.), but then he reminded them that the Lord their God promised them the land (v. 5); God fought for them to take the land (v. 3); and God had driven out the nations before them (v. 10). The strength of a man as great as Joshua would fail, but God never fails.

In verse 6, Joshua repeated to the people what God told him at the beginning of the book—be courageous and keep the law of Moses (1:7-8). He reminded them to keep the Law diligently and not to deviate from it in any direction. This way, they would continue to walk in the will of God and, thus, in the favor of God. Joshua would be passing from the scene, but he reminded the people to *“cleave [be joined to, hold fast, cling] unto the LORD your God”* (v. 8), as they had while he was leading them into Canaan. The source of their success was not Joshua; it was the Lord their God. If they continued to be faithful to Him, they would continue to succeed long after Joshua passed from the scene.

B. Joshua's Counsel for Continuing Success *Joshua 23:11–16*

Considering all God had done for Israel, Joshua counseled them to *“love the LORD your God”* (v. 11). The Lord brought them out of slavery in Egypt and gave them the land they were now settling into as a free nation. Therefore, their love and commitment must never waver. They must not allow the false gods of the nations of Canaan to pollute their lips, their lives, or their worship (v. 7). Indeed, they must not be influenced by the pagan nations by intermarrying with them because, through such marriages, they would be inviting the influence of idolatry into their homes. As Joshua put it, they would *“be snares and traps ... scourges in your sides, and thorns in your eyes”* (v. 13). If this happened, the Israelites would perish from the land that the Lord their God had given them.

Joshua told them his time in the land of the living was ending: *“I am going the way of all the earth”* (v. 14). With only a couple of exceptions, Joshua had been a great leader during Israel's conquest of the land. He reminded the people that God kept all His promises, which they could all attest to. Knowing what God had done to bring them into the Promised Land, they should be motivated to remain committed to God and the covenant He gave them through Moses. Joshua would soon be absent from them, but God would always be ready to lead them to continued success if they faithfully followed Him. However, if they were unfaithful and incurred the Lord's anger, He could remove them from the land as quickly as He had given it to them (vv. 15-16).

2. GOD RECALLS HIS FAITHFULNESS *Joshua 24:1–13*

A. God's Work From Abraham to Moses *Joshua 24:1–5*

Chapter 24 represents a covenant renewal. Each generation needed to recommit to the covenant and affirm their intention to keep the Lord's commandments. In covenant renewal ceremonies, the author of the covenant (in this case, God) would remind the other party (Israel) what He had done for them and would do for them in response to their obedience to the covenant's conditions. This gathering of people at Shechem, where the tabernacle was located, occurred at an unspecified time after chapter 23. Joshua again called for the people and the leaders of Israel to present themselves before God (24:1). Joshua came as God's spokesman to faithfully declare the word of *“the LORD God of Israel”* (v. 2). What follows through verse 13 is God's message to Israel. The first-person pronoun, *I*, indicates God was speaking through Joshua.

In this message, God said He chose to create a people for Himself through Abraham, whose father, Terah, had worshiped idols *“on the other side of the flood”* (v. 2), meaning the Jordan River. Then, through the promised seed of Isaac and Isaac’s son Jacob, God created a people for Himself. Jacob, whom God renamed *“Israel”* (Genesis 32:28), and his twelve sons went to Egypt during a drought, where they grew in number but were eventually enslaved by the Egyptians (Joshua 24:4). Then, God sent Moses with his brother Aaron, and through a series of plagues in Egypt, God brought them out of bondage (v. 5). At around 110 years old, Joshua would remember the exodus from Egypt and God’s provision in the wilderness. God sent Moses to Pharaoh as His spokesman, but God, not Moses, delivered them from Egyptian bondage.

B. God’s Work in the Wilderness Joshua 24:6–13

Continuing the account of God’s promise, protection, and provision in the life of Israel, God reminded them, *“I brought your fathers out of Egypt”* (v. 6). Some of the people there with Joshua may have remembered the plagues and the miraculous way God delivered them from Egypt. Joshua certainly would have remembered. When Pharaoh changed his mind after letting the Jews leave Egypt and sent his army to bring them back, God kept the army from trapping them at the Red Sea by opening up the sea so the Jews could walk across on dry land. Then, God brought the sea down upon Pharaoh’s army (v. 7). In the wilderness, before crossing the Jordan, God destroyed the Amorites and the Moabites for Israel. When Balak sent Balaam to curse Israel, God caused Balaam to bless them instead (vv. 9-10).

In verse 11, God reminded the people that once they crossed the Jordan, He delivered Jericho and many other nations into their hands. When God said He sent *“the hornet”* to drive out two kings of the Amorites (v. 12), some view this as figurative language. However, in Exodus 23:28, God promised to send hornets before His people to drive out various hostile groups. The promise of hornets is also recorded in Deuteronomy 7:20. Although there is no record of this happening, that does not mean it did not happen, and here God said it did. To sum it up, God reminded them that just as He promised, He gave them land that they did not have to work for, cities and homes they did not build, and vineyards and orchards that they did not plant, but from which they enjoyed the fruit (Joshua 24:13). These were blessings as promised in the covenant for their obedience (Deuteronomy 30:19).

3. CHOOSE WHOM YOU WILL SERVE Joshua 24:14–28

A. The People Promise Faithfulness Joshua 24:14–18

After God testified to His faithfulness in His covenant relationship with Israel, Joshua challenged the people to recommit to the covenant by repeatedly telling them to *“serve the LORD”* (vv. 14-22). This was a covenant renewal ceremony, and Joshua led the way by telling the people they would have to decide what they would do. He added, *“As for me and my house, we will serve the LORD”* (v. 15). Though the Bible never mentions Joshua having a wife or children, some believe the reference to his *“house”* and saying *“we will serve the LORD”* suggests he had a family. However, he could be referring to himself and the servants of his house. Joshua’s point was that he and the people of his household were recommitting themselves to serving God, honoring the covenant, and refusing to allow the false gods of the land to have any influence in their lives.

After affirming his commitment to serve God, Joshua also recounted God’s promises in His covenant relationship with Israel. He began with their liberation from Egypt, recalled that God preserved them in the wilderness, and then drove the people out of Canaan before them (vv. 17-18). Given all that God had done, of course, he would serve the Lord because *“he is our God.”* Joshua was calling the people to commit to their covenant relationship with God, but as for Joshua, he had already made that decision. He was not asking people to do something he had not done or would not do.

B. Joshua Records the People's Promise *Joshua 24:19–28*

Knowing the weakness of fallen humanity, Joshua bluntly stated, “*Ye cannot serve the LORD: for He is an holy God; He is a jealous God; He will not forgive your transgressions nor your sins*” (v. 19). Joshua clarified by saying if they turned to false gods, they would be in violation of their covenant relationship with God, and just as God had blessed them, He would “*turn and do [them] hurt, and consume [them]*” (v. 20). The people responded, “*Nay; but we will serve the LORD*” (v. 21).

Joshua then said they had testified that they would serve the Lord, and they understood the ramifications if they did not. They agreed they were witnesses to their promise (v. 22), and God would be justified in punishing them if they were unfaithful. In verse 23, Joshua warned them to destroy the false gods they were concealing. If they did not purge themselves of this sin, they would be inviting God’s punishment.

The people again said they would serve the Lord and only obey His voice (v. 25), so Joshua established the covenant renewal by writing the words of the covenant in the Book of the Law. He then took a large stone and set it up under an oak tree beside “*the sanctuary of the LORD*” (v. 26). He told the people that the stone would be a witness of their covenant renewal and, ideally, help keep the people from violating their commitment to God (v. 27). Afterward, Joshua sent the people back to their allotted land, the inheritance of each tribe and family.

CALL TO DISCIPLESHIP

All Christians have a covenant relationship with God that requires daily dedication to serving Him. This means we put Him first and completely commit to His will.

MINISTRY IN ACTION

Just as Joshua challenged the people to serve the Lord in sincerity and truth, we should encourage one another and be willing to lift the hands that hang down and strengthen the knees of the weak.

WORKSHEET

Why Ancient Israel's Conquest of Canaan?

Why Did Ancient Israel Wage War to take possession of the land of Canaan from the seven Canaanite nations (Deuteronomy 7:1-6)? Because God had promised the land of Canaan to Abrahams descendants (the Israelites), God commanded Israel to fulfill that promise by taking possession of Canaan.

Why Did God Give the Land of Canaan to Israel? The moral justification for God taking the land of Canaan from the Canaanites, and giving it to Israel, was the extreme evil of the Canaanites as a consequence of their worship of false gods (see Genesis 15:16; Leviticus 18:24-28; 20:22-24).

The basic principle underlying Gods decision to give the land of Canaan to Israel is that God exercises His sovereign power and authority to establish the length of existence and territorial boundaries of every nation on earth:

He [God] has made from one blood [one man, Adam] every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their preappointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings (The Apostle Paul, Acts 17:26 NKJV).

The Most High God rules in the kingdom of men, and appoints over it whomever He chooses (Daniel 5:21 NKJV)

Also see Genesis 11:1-2, 4, 8.

Earthly Governments Establish Their National Boundaries, but, in fact, God is the One who establishes national boundaries and determines how long each nation will continue as a nation. The Bible warns, *The wicked shall be turned into hell, and all the nations that forget God* (Psalm 9:17 NKJV). Because the ancient Israelites forgot God, He, in righteous judgment, took the land of Canaan from them and gave it to the Assyrians (2 Kings 18:11-12; 721 BC), and then to the Babylonians (2 Chronicles 36:15-20; 586 BC), until, following their repentance, He restored them to Canaan under the rule of the Persians (Ezra 1:1-4; 536 BC).

Looking Back and Forward

1. Explain the three uses of the word "*brought*" in Joshua 24:5-7.
2. What would it take for the Israelites to serve the Lord "*in sincerity and in truth*" (v.14)?
3. What did the Israelites credit God for doing (vv. 17-18)?

Why was this important?

4. Explain the statement, "*He is a jealous God*" (v. 19).

Is this a positive or negative truth for us?

5. How were the Israelites witnesses against themselves (v. 22)?

How is this true for us as professing Christians?

6. As Christians, what do we need to "*throw away*" (v. 23 NIV), as Joshua commanded the people to do?