

The Book of Joshua

LESSON
FOUR

COVENANT LOYALTY



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Lesson Four

Covenant Loyalty

INTRODUCTION

Imagine that you're watching a theatrical production in which one character takes a leading role in nearly every scene. It's obvious that what he does in the story is significant. But in the last scene, he steps to the center of the stage and explains the grand significance of the entire drama to his audience.

Well, in many ways, this is what happens in the book of Joshua. Joshua has a leading role throughout the book. And everything he does is significant. But in the last scenes, he offers two speeches that our author used to reveal the grand significance of the entire book for the people of Israel.

This is the fourth lesson in our series on *The Book of Joshua*, and we've entitled it Israel's "Covenant Loyalty." In this lesson, we'll explore how the third and final division of Joshua reveals the significance of our book by calling Israel to be faithful to the terms of their covenant with God.

Earlier in this series, we said that the original meaning of Joshua could be summarized like this:

The book of Joshua was written about Israel's victorious conquest, tribal inheritances and covenant loyalty in Joshua's day to address similar challenges facing later generations.

The book was originally composed to guide Old Testament Israelites living either in the period of the judges, during the monarchy, or as late as the Babylonian exile. It addresses how the original audience was to deal with their enemies, their homeland, and their privileges and responsibilities as God's covenant people.

As we learned in previous lessons, to reach this goal, our author divided his book into three main divisions. In chapters 1–12, he focused on Israel's victorious conquest. In chapters 13–22, he moved his attention to Israel's tribal inheritances. And in chapters 23, 24, he concentrated on Israel's covenant loyalty. In this lesson, we'll look at this last major division.

The third division of Joshua consists of two main parts and an afterword. It begins with a speech, in 23:1-16, in which Joshua presented covenant warnings to Israel. It then turns to a second speech, in 24:1-28, given at a ceremony of covenant renewal that is followed, in verses 29-33, with a brief afterword reporting Joshua's death and several subsequent events.

Our lesson on Israel's covenant loyalty will look at these final chapters in three steps. We'll look first at Joshua's covenant warnings in his initial speech and then at Israel's covenant renewal, including a few comments on the afterword that follows. Finally, we'll explore Christian applications for this division of our book. Let's begin with Joshua's covenant warnings.

COVENANT WARNINGS

Everyone familiar with the Bible knows that both Old and New Testament authors frequently warned their audiences not to rebel against God. But many evangelicals don't readily associate such warnings with the biblical idea of "covenant." Rather, we tend to connect God's covenants only with his blessings. Now, we've seen in this series that the author of Joshua often drew attention to kindnesses that God showed to Israel through his covenant with them. But as we're about to see, chapter 23 of our book gives special attention to warnings about judgments that come when God's people violate his covenant.

We'll explore Joshua's covenant warnings using a familiar pattern. First, we'll consider the structure and content of this section. And second, we'll reflect on its original meaning, or how it was designed to impact its first audience. Let's begin with the structure and content of this chapter.

STRUCTURE AND CONTENT

You'll recall that Joshua had led Israel's conquest into the heart of Canaan, and he'd waged major campaigns in the south and in the north. He'd also maintained the unity of the nation of Israel as he sent them to settle in their particular tribal inheritances, both in Transjordan and Cisjordan. But at this point in the book, our author focused attention on an assembly that Joshua held, probably at Shiloh, in the territory of Ephraim. Israel gathered there to hear crucial instructions from Joshua.

For our purposes, it will help to look at this chapter in two steps, beginning with Joshua's summons that appears in 23:1-2a.

Joshua's Summons

It's important to remember that the book of Joshua refers to a number of other times when Joshua gathered Israel. But the description of this summons indicates that our author considered this assembly far more significant than Joshua's earlier gatherings.

In the first place, our author mentioned, in 23:1, that Joshua was "old and well advanced in years." Now, this same expression appears at the beginning of the second division of our book, in 13:1, but here we find the additional note that this was, "a long time afterward." And along these same lines, in 23:2, Joshua began his speech saying, "I am now old and well advanced in years." And in verse 14, he even commented, "I am about to go the way of all the earth." Our author's emphasis on Joshua's advanced age indicated that this assembly was one of his final acts as Israel's leader. Much like people today give special attention to a dying person's last words, every faithful Israelite in the original audience would have understood that this was a very important event.

In the second place, 23:2 also notes that, "Joshua summoned all Israel, its elders and heads, its judges and officers." Notice that Joshua didn't address the high priest or even high-ranking Levites who largely remained separated from the common people of

Israel. Rather, he addressed “all Israel” through the kinds of leaders that had frequent contact with the people. It was the responsibility of the “elders and heads . . . judges and officers” to enforce what Joshua was about to say. So, we see that in this assembly, Joshua raised matters that impacted every Israelite, every day and in every sphere of life.

But what was so important about this assembly? We find the answer to this in the second step of chapter 23, in Joshua’s speech. From verse 2b-16, Joshua warned Israel against violating God’s covenant.

Joshua’s Speech

We’ve talked about divine covenants elsewhere in greater detail. But in brief, divine covenants reveal the central administrative policies that God established for his kingdom. We can organize the dynamics of these covenant policies into three main categories: divine benevolence, human loyalty and the consequences of blessings and curses.

When we speak of divine benevolence we have in mind how God’s kindness both initiates and sustains all of his covenants. Human beings have never been able to begin or continue a covenant relationship with God by their own merit or strength. Divine benevolence is always essential. At the same time, divine covenants also raise the expectation of human loyalty as our grateful response to God’s benevolence. Human beings have always been told to offer God their loyal service in the light of what he has done for them. And in the Scriptures, God’s covenants also entail the consequences of blessings and curses. When God’s people are loyal to him and observe his commands, they receive his abundant blessings. But if they are disloyal and reject his commands, they experience his curses.

Now, biblical authors pointed out that these dynamics frequently unfold in ways that are inscrutable to human beings. God’s patience and forgiveness, as well as his severity and judgment, often surprise us because his ways are so far beyond our capacity to understand. But time and again, biblical authors assured us that God is always true to the terms of his covenants and that he administers them with unsurpassed goodness, knowledge and wisdom.

As we’re about to see, Joshua’s speech in chapter 23 refers directly to all three covenant dynamics. But, primarily Joshua emphasized warnings about the curses that would come to Israel for flagrant disloyalty to God.

When Joshua is speaking to the people in chapter 23, in the first 16 verses, he’s talking about the warnings of the covenant. Joshua is reminding them about the divine command to be loyal. The whole book has talked about the God of the covenant; it’s talked about the benevolence of this God, the God who fights in the battle, the God who gives victory, the God who pours out his care, the God who pours out his favors, but most importantly, the God who wants us to be loyal. So, Joshua is telling the people about obedience and about the consequences of obeying and of disobeying. Just like every other

covenant, this one included, not just the powerful king who makes a covenant with a weaker king, and not just the benevolence of that powerful king, but also the command for us to be loyal, and the consequences of obeying and disobeying, of being loyal and of not being loyal. After writing a whole book about the greatness of God — the God of the covenant who does everything, not because we deserve it, but because he has made a covenant with us — Joshua warned the people not to forget that we also have to be loyal to that God.

— Pastor Ornan Cruz, translation

Although it's likely that Joshua said much more in such an important assembly, our author summarized his speech in three segments. Each segment begins with a reminder of divine benevolence followed by a focus on covenant loyalty, covenant consequences, or both.

Joshua 23:2-8. The first segment, in 23:2-8, begins with two examples of God's benevolence to Israel. In verse 3, Joshua reminded Israel that their victorious conquest resulted because "the Lord your God ... fought for you." And in verse 4, Joshua recalled that God himself had "allotted ... as an inheritance ... those nations that remain."

Joshua then turned to the requirement of Israel's grateful loyalty to God. In verse 6, Joshua called for Israel to "be very strong ... and to do all that is written in the Book of the Law of Moses." These words recalled God's commands to Joshua in 1:7. But following these familiar words, we find a call to a specific kind of loyal service. For the first time in the book, we hear Joshua's call to Israel to avoid Canaanite idolatry and the corrupt practices of Canaan's idolatrous societies. In verse 7, he said, "You may not mix with these nations remaining among you or make mention of the names of their gods or swear by them." Instead, Joshua told Israel in verse 8, "cling to the Lord your God."

Needless to say, Joshua's prohibition against idolatry wasn't new. It recalled the first two of the Ten Commandments and many other passages in the Pentateuch that warned against the corrupting influences of false gods. But by introducing it here, our author made it clear that this issue was particularly important to everything he had written in earlier chapters of his book. Given everything that God had done for his people under Joshua's leadership, the Israelites were obligated not to turn to other gods.

Joshua 23:9-13. The second segment of Joshua's speech, in 23:9-13, also begins with God's benevolence. In verse 9, Joshua reminded Israel that "The Lord has driven out before you great and strong nations." And in verse 10, he said that, even now, "It is the Lord your God who fights for you."

Then, in verse 11, as in the first segment, Joshua called for Israel to respond with loyalty. He exhorted them to, "love the Lord your God." Here Joshua alluded to Deuteronomy 6:5 — the greatest of all commandments. This familiar verse says, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might." Both in Deuteronomy and in Joshua, to love God was to be wholly and exclusively devoted to the Lord and to no other god.

But in this segment of his speech, Joshua went one step further. To indicate how necessary it was to maintain this singular devotion, he warned Israel of severe consequences of curses for disloyalty to God. As he put it in verses 12, 13, “If you ... 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 ... [then] God will no longer drive out these nations before you.” And he added, “They shall be a snare and a trap for you ... until you perish from off this good ground.” Despite all God had done for them, if Israel followed the ways of the Canaanites that remained in the Promised Land, they would come under God's severe judgment.

In many respects, this exclusive focus on curses is unusual. In passages like Exodus 19:4-6, we find only positive consequences of future blessings mentioned. In other passages like Deuteronomy 28 and 30:15-19, the offer of blessings and the threat of curses stand alongside each other. But in this segment of Joshua’s speech, he only mentioned the future consequences of *curses*.

Joshua 23:14-16. In the third segment of his speech, in 23:14-16, Joshua again began with God’s benevolence. In verse 14, we read, “Not one word has failed of all the good things that the Lord your God promised concerning you.” This statement alludes to 21:45 where our author made a similar affirmation. But in this third segment, Joshua skipped calling for loyalty and instead immediately warned Israel of severe consequences for violating the covenant. In 23:15, he emphasized that God would bring on them “all the evil things, until he has destroyed you from off this good land.” As places like Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 4, 28 teach, rebellion against God would lead to the destruction of Israel and a period of exile from the Promised Land.

The progression among these segments reveals Joshua’s primary emphasis in this speech. First and foremost, he wanted to warn Israel of curses that would fall on them if they proved to be ungrateful for the kindnesses of God. Now, it’s important to note that Joshua didn’t threaten these terrible consequences for small failures. He warned Israel in 23:16 not to “transgress the covenant of the Lord your God ... and serve other gods.” The expression “transgress” translates the Hebrew verb *abar* (אַבַּר). Our author reserved this terminology for serious, treasonous offenses, as in the case of Achan in 7:10, 15. Joshua didn’t have in mind mere imperfections or peccadilloes. Rather, he meant the rank apostasy of idolatry, or as he put it here, the devastating sin of serving other gods.

It’s clear even from the text of 23:16 that he’s warning the people that they are not to go and serve other gods. So, in this case, transgressing the covenant of the Lord would involve breaking the first two commandments, which thereby would entail breaking the covenant. And this is what Moses warned the people not to do in the blessings and curses of the covenant in Leviticus 26, and it’s what he has urged them not to do in places like Deuteronomy 4:25-31 and Deuteronomy 28–32. And so, Joshua is continuing the instruction of his mentor, Moses. And he’s urging the people — now that they have crossed into the land and subdued the land — that they are not to break the commandments and thereby transgress the covenant of the Lord. And Moses warned what would happen: if they did so, they would be

exiled from the land. And so, in a sense, Joshua is urging them to have a long life in the land by keeping the covenant.

— Dr. James M. Hamilton

With the basic structure and content of Joshua’s covenant warnings in mind, we’re in a position to consider the original meaning of this chapter.

ORIGINAL MEANING

In general terms, it isn’t difficult to imagine the impact that the author of Joshua hoped this chapter would have on his audience. By the period of the judges, Israel had already begun to experience covenant curses because they had been drawn into Canaanite idolatry. At different times during the monarchy, even worse consequences had come on Israel because of their involvement in the worship of Baal and other gods. And of course, the Babylonian exile eventually came on Israel just as Joshua had said. So, rather than allowing his audience to blame their troubling circumstances on God’s failure to be faithful to his people, our author expressly told his original audience that their trials resulted from their failure to remain faithful to God.

To convince his audience of their responsibility for their circumstances, our author wove into his covenant warnings the five main themes that we’ve seen throughout his book.

Divine Authority

In the first place, in Joshua’s summons, he revealed the divine authority behind the assembly. In 23:2a, he mentioned that it was *Joshua* who summoned the people. As we know, our author repeatedly emphasized that God had authorized Joshua as Moses’ authoritative successor. So, by stating that it was Joshua who summoned the people, and then that it was Joshua who gave the speech that followed in verses 2b-16, our author emphasized the divine authority behind both.

As we’ve already hinted, this chapter of our book presented a point of view that was difficult for many in the original audience to accept. Many did not want to accept responsibility for the consequences of their failure to keep covenant. So, our author addressed the reticence of his original audience by making it clear that Joshua himself had spoken these words.

God’s Covenant

In the second place, it’s not surprising that the covenant warnings in Joshua’s speech are devoted to the theme of God’s covenant. In 23:4, the author alluded to God’s covenant when he described Cisjordan as Israel’s “inheritance.” You’ll recall that the

Hebrew term for “inheritance” — “*nachalah*” (נַחֲלָה) — indicated land promised by oath, or covenant, to the patriarchs in passages like Genesis 15:18. We should also recall that in 23:16, Joshua summed up his speech by warning Israel not to “transgress the covenant of the Lord your God.”

Our author’s concentration on God’s covenant called his original audience to express gratitude for the many benevolences God had shown them and their ancestors. And Joshua warned of the severe consequences of divine curses if they did not.

Standard of Moses’ Law

In the third place, Joshua’s covenant warnings also highlighted the standard of Moses’ law in a number of ways. In Joshua’s speech, in 23:6, he ordered Israel to “do all that is written in the Book of the Law of Moses.” In 23:11, Joshua drew from Moses’ law in Deuteronomy 6:5 when he ordered Israel to “love the Lord your God.” And Joshua commanded Israel, in verse 7, not to “mix with these nations” and not to worship their gods. These, and similar instructions in verses 8, 12 drew from passages like Deuteronomy 7:3 and 10:20.

Our author noted how Joshua had referred to Moses’ law to remind his original audience of a point of view that appears time and again in his book. The only hope they had for receiving the blessings of God was to reaffirm their loyalty to the standard of Moses’ law.

God’s Supernatural Power

In the fourth place, this chapter detailing Joshua’s covenant warnings also draws attention to God’s supernatural power. For example, in 23:1, the record of Joshua’s summons refers to God’s great power when it states that, “The Lord had given rest to Israel from all their surrounding enemies.” The same theme also appears several times in Joshua’s speech. In 23:3, Joshua reminded Israel that “It is the Lord your God who has fought for you.” In verse 5, he assured them that “The Lord your God will push [your enemies] back ... and drive them out of your sight.” He repeated this motif in verse 9 saying, “The Lord has driven out ... great and strong nations.” And in verse 10, he said, “The Lord your God ... fights for you, just as he promised.” Joshua also referred to God’s supernatural power in the judgment against Israel. As he put it in verse 15, “The Lord will bring upon you all the evil things, until he has destroyed you.” And in verse 16 Joshua warned that, “The anger of the Lord will be kindled against you.”

As we can see, our author repeatedly pointed out how Joshua had reminded Israel of God’s supernatural power. He intended Joshua’s words to move his original audience toward gratitude and blessings. And, along the same lines, he designed every warning of supernatural curses for disloyalty to strike fear into their hearts and lead them to repentance.

All Israel

And in the fifth place, the covenant warnings in chapter 23 also stressed the participation of all Israel. In Joshua's summons, verse 2 notes that Joshua had assembled "all Israel." And in Joshua's speech, his warnings against the consequences of curses for violating God's covenant didn't apply to just *some* of God's people. The future of the entire nation of Israel would be determined according to the principles Joshua declared in this chapter.

Without a doubt, the author of Joshua focused on this major theme in chapter 23 to call everyone in Israel to pay attention to what Joshua had said. As in the days of Joshua, the entire nation in our author's day needed to give heed to Joshua's warnings. Only then could they hope to find the blessings of God.

God instructed the Israelites the things that they should do and should not do... But they were going to be with neighbors who worshipped other gods and with other horrible and terrible practices. So, God wanted Israelites to remain faithful in the covenant with him. And he promised that if they would stay faithful in the covenant with God, things would go well with them. But if they violate his covenant, something wrong will happen to them. This is the same even in our lives. If we remain faithful to God's covenant, God will be with us, will lead us, and will continue to work in us as he promised Joshua.

— Pastor Micah Ngussa

Now that we've seen how the book of Joshua deals with Israel's covenant loyalty by reporting Joshua's covenant warnings, we're in a position to turn to our second main topic in this lesson: Joshua's ceremony of covenant renewal.

COVENANT RENEWAL

In many ways, the drama of chapter 23 leaves us in suspense. Joshua gave a speech that warned Israel of terrible things that would happen if they broke their covenant with God. But there's no indication of how Israel responded. Our author omitted any record of their response to prepare his audience for what he was about to write in chapter 24. In this last chapter, Joshua held a second assembly. Here, in a ceremony of renewal, the Israelites recommitted themselves to keeping covenant with God. And this ceremony modeled how the original audience was to respond to everything they learned from the book of Joshua.

We'll look at Joshua's ceremony of covenant renewal in our usual fashion. We'll note its structure and content and then its original meaning. Let's consider first the structure and content of Joshua's covenant renewal.

STRUCTURE AND CONTENT

As we've seen, after the tribes of Israel had settled in their various inheritances, Joshua called them to assemble, probably in Shiloh. But in this chapter, we find another assembly — this time in Shechem. Shechem was a special sacred place for Israel. It was the first site where Abraham built an altar to God in the Promised Land in Genesis 12:7. And Shechem was in the vicinity of Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal, where Moses had commanded Israel to renew their covenant with God in Deuteronomy 11, 27. And, in this final chapter of our book, Shechem is where we come to the culmination of Joshua's service as the leader of Israel.

Israel's covenant renewal at Shechem is a seamless narrative that divides into four main parts. We first read Joshua's second summons to the assembly in 24:1. This summons is balanced in the end of the book by Joshua's dismissal of the assembly in 24:28. Between these two, the main narrative consists of Joshua's second speech and Israel's responses in verses 2-24, followed by the ratification of the covenant in verses 25-27. Consider first the opening summons in verse 1.

Summons

The record of Joshua's summons to this assembly is both similar to and different from his summons in chapter 23. Like the previous assembly, 24:1 tells us that Joshua brought together "all the tribes of Israel" as well as "the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel." The most significant difference we see in this summons is that Joshua and Israel "presented themselves before God." In other words, they assembled before the visible glory of God at the tabernacle. This is the first of several times when our author highlighted the significance of this event by drawing parallels to Exodus 19–24. In these chapters, Israel made a covenant before God's visible presence on Mount Sinai. So, just as in Exodus, covenant renewal under Joshua also took place in God's visible presence.

Speech & Responses

After Joshua's summons, our author turned to Joshua's speech and Israel's responses in 24:2-24. In general terms, Joshua's speech here resembled his speech at the assembly in chapter 23 because it drew attention to the basic dynamics of God's covenant with Israel: It focused on divine benevolence; it called for Israel's loyalty to God; and it warned of the consequences of disloyalty. Idolatry was also a special focus of chapter 24, much like it was in chapter 23. But unlike the previous chapter, this chapter reports how Israel responded to what Joshua had to say.

The first segment of this speech amounts to a lengthy rehearsal of divine benevolence in 24:2-13. You'll recall that in chapter 23, Joshua summarized several things God had done for Israel. But here, rather than using his own words, Joshua began in verse 2 saying, "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel ..." Throughout these verses,

Joshua reported what he had heard God himself say, probably at the tabernacle. Some eighteen times God declared what he had done for Israel using the first-person pronoun “I.” This first-person perspective echoes Israel’s covenant at Mount Sinai where Moses reported things he had heard God say on Mount Sinai. And it drew attention to the fact that God himself was directly reminding Israel of his many benevolences.

God rehearsed his benevolences to Israel over three periods of history. First, in verses 3, 4, God recalled how he had shown favor to earlier generations in the period of Israel’s patriarchs. Second, in verses 5-10, he discussed his favor in the time of Moses. And third, in verses 11-13, he ended with what had happened to the people of Israel in the days of Joshua. In verse 12, God made it clear that “It was not by your sword or by your bow” that Israel’s enemies had been defeated. And in verse 13, he added that he had given them “a land on which you had not labored and cities that you had not built, and ... vineyards and olive orchards that you did not plant.” The main idea is clear enough. The Israelites that assembled before God owed every success to God’s benevolence.

I believe the covenant ceremony had a tremendous message to teach the children of Israel. One aspect of it is looking at how he begins this farewell speech in talking about God's faithfulness in Israel's history. He starts with Abraham and then he goes on and talks about other patriarchs. He moves on then to the Red Sea experience where God has saved Israel there, and then talks about God's faithfulness in the wilderness, and finally brings them up to speed talking about how God has given them victory in the Promised Land. And they have not only heard of God's faithfulness through these other events, but they've seen some of this themselves firsthand. And the point is, I think, that as Joshua goes through this historical lesson for them, is just to remind them of God's faithfulness, that God has been with his people all the way back to Abraham and has continued to be faithful; therefore, they are to be faithful.

— Dr. T. J. Betts

In the second segment of Joshua’s speech, in verses 14-24, Joshua reflected on God’s kindnesses with a call to loyalty and a warning of consequences for failure. And, like Moses in Exodus 19, 24, Joshua expected and received responses from the people. This segment divides into three calls and responses.

First Call and Response. The first call and response appears in verses 14-18. In verse 14, Joshua exhorted the Israelites to “fear the Lord and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness.” Then he explained that the first step toward this end was for the Israelites to “put away the gods that your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt.” Following this, in verse 15, he told them to “choose this day whom you will serve.” Despite the fact that Joshua had warned against idolatry in his speech in chapter 23, the Israelites still had idols among them. And now, Joshua insisted that God required them to reject all false gods by ridding themselves of every idol. And Joshua set the example by saying those well-known words of 24:15: “As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”

This theme of serving God was so important to Joshua that he used the word “serve,” or “*abad*” (עָבַד) in Hebrew, sixteen times in this chapter. And in verses 16-18, Israel responded positively to Joshua’s call by expressing their commitment to serve God. As we read in verse 18, the people answered, “We also will serve the Lord, for he is our God.”

Second Call and Response. The second call and response appears in verses 19-22. In verse 19, Joshua challenged the assembly by saying, “You are not able to serve the Lord, for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins.” Now, Joshua didn’t mean here that Israel was unable to serve the Lord and that God would not forgive their rebellion and sins in all times and circumstances. Rather, he focused on the fact that they could not recommit to serving God and receiving God’s blessings until they removed their idols. Although God had patiently overlooked this sin in the past, he would do so no longer. As Joshua warned in 24:20, continuing to serve idols would result in the terrible consequence that God would, “turn and do you harm and consume you, after having done you good.” Happily, after the people heard this dreadful warning, they responded in 24:21 saying, “No ... we will serve the Lord.”

Third Call and Response. The third call and response appears in verses 23, 24. Having received positive responses from the people in verses 18, 21 and 22, Joshua reaffirmed, in verse 23, that the first outward act of renewed loyalty to God was to “put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your heart to the Lord.” And Israel replied in verse 24, “The Lord our God we will serve, and his voice we will obey.”

The closing chapters of Joshua — chapters 23, 24 — contain a speech by Joshua about the need for exclusive loyalty to the Lord. And particularly of note you might find in there the admonition of Joshua for them to put away the gods which their fathers served beyond the river and in Egypt. And this is in reference to the fact that Israel had this tendency always to go and follow after other gods. It’s a fundamental law of the human heart, according to A.W. Tozer, that our hearts tend toward idolatry. And Joshua knew that only through exclusive loyalty to Jehovah, to God, would Israel not only succeed, but would experience the fullness of blessing because the gods of the nations, as the psalm tells us, they’re dead gods, and they make those who worship them like them, but there’s only one living and true God. And so, for Israel to remain faithful to the Lord and exclusively committed to him — as he was exclusively committed to them — was their only source of hope and life and prosperity in the future.

— Rev. Michael J. Glodo

Ratification Ceremony

After Joshua’s speech and Israel’s responses, the narrative turns to the ceremonial ratification of Israel’s newfound commitment to God in verses 25-27. This segment

begins in verse 25 telling us that, “Joshua made a covenant with the people ... and put in place statutes and rules for them.” In verse 26, Joshua also ratified this covenant commitment by erecting “a large stone ... under the terebinth that was by the sanctuary of the Lord.”

The terebinth tree mentioned here is reminiscent of Genesis 12:6 and the great tree of Moreh at Shechem. This was where Abraham built his first altar in Canaan. And, as we’ve seen throughout this series, stones were often used for commemoration in the book of Joshua. For instance, in 4:7, Joshua erected twelve stones for the Israelites at Gilgal as “a memorial forever.” And the altar built by the tribes of Transjordan in 22:34 was erected as “a witness between us that the Lord is God.” In 24:27, Joshua explained that, “This stone ... shall be a witness against you, lest you deal falsely with your God.” In future generations, this witness-stone would make it impossible to deny Israel’s voluntary covenant with God to reject all idolatry. And if they failed to keep this vow, they could only blame themselves for God’s judgments that would come upon them.

Dismissal

After these sobering events, the account of Israel’s covenant renewal closes with Joshua’s dismissal of the assembly in verse 28. Our author finalized his record of this event by noting that, “Joshua sent the people away, every man to his inheritance.” This ending to the narrative raised a crucial question for the original audience to consider. Did Israel keep their commitment to reject idolatry and serve only the Lord? In the afterword that closes the book, in 24:31, our author reported that “Israel served the Lord all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua.” But as we learn from the books of Judges, Samuel and Kings, while Israel remained faithful for a while, later generations violated their solemn oath against idolatry time and again. And the original audience of our book knew the consequences they had suffered because of it.

With the structure and content of Joshua’s covenant renewal in view, we should turn to the original meaning.

ORIGINAL MEANING

On the whole, the implications of Joshua’s covenant renewal for the original audience are plain enough. By the time our author completed the book of Joshua, the people of Israel had failed to keep the commitments their ancestors had made in Joshua’s day. And the consequences of their disobedience were all too clear. If anyone in Israel wondered why they suffered so severely, Joshua 24 explains that they deserved God’s judgment for the flagrant violations of their covenant.

In an earlier lesson we saw that the original audience of our book may have lived sometime during the period of the judges, during the monarchy, or even as late as Judah’s exile to Babylon. Whatever the case, God’s people had suffered severe consequences for violating the covenant that Joshua renewed in chapter 24 of our book. In the period of the judges, many in Israel fell prey to the temptation of idolatry. And as a result, various

regions of the nation suffered cycles of defeat and deliverance. During the monarchy, idolatry led to all kinds of hardships. In the northern kingdom, repeated Assyrian aggression eventually led to the fall of Samaria and exile for much of the population. Later on, idolatry in the southern kingdom also led to the fall of Jerusalem and to the Babylonian exile. During all of these times, the faithful of Israel longed to know what they could do to find forgiveness and blessings from God. Joshua 24 gave them guidance: Israel must remember God's many kindnesses toward them and renew their covenant with him. And they must do this by devoting themselves exclusively to the service of their one true God, just as Israel had done in Joshua's day.

To move his original audience to action, our author again wove all five of his repeated themes into this chapter on covenant renewal.

Divine Authority

In the first place, he made it clear that divine authority undergirded this renewal. As in chapter 23, the summons in 24:1 mentions Joshua by name to make it clear that God's authorized leader was in charge of this ceremony. In addition, Joshua's speech and Israel's responses in 24:2 begin with the words, "Thus says the Lord ..." These introductory words leave no doubt that God's own authority undergirded what happened in this chapter. And beyond this, our author went on in his record of Joshua's speech to repeat several times that it was Joshua, God's ordained representative, who spoke to the assembly.

By drawing attention to divine authority in this chapter, our author called every person in his original audience to pay special attention. If they ignored what had happened in Joshua's covenant renewal and went their own way, our author insisted that they were rebelling against the authority of God.

God's Covenant

In the second place, throughout this account of covenant renewal, Joshua repeatedly referred to God's covenant. His speech and Israel's responses touched on the dynamics of divine benevolence, human loyalty and the consequences of disobedience. And more than this, in Joshua's ratification ceremonies, our author stated explicitly, in 24:25 that, "Joshua made a covenant with the people that day." Our author also alluded to God's covenant with Israel in the dismissal of the assembly. In verse 28, he said that "Joshua sent ... every man to his inheritance," once again using the Hebrew term "*nachalah*" (נַחֲלָה).

Now, as we've just seen, the theme of God's covenant in this chapter focuses both on God's kindness and on the requirement of loyalty. Clearly, our author hoped his original audience would realize how they had violated God's covenant. And he called them to renew their commitment to keeping covenant with God. Without repentance and renewal they and their children would continue to face the curses of the covenant.

Standard of Moses' Law

In the third place, Joshua's covenant renewal in chapter 24 acknowledged the standard of Moses' law. For instance, in Joshua's speech and Israel's responses, verses 14, 15 call Israel to reject "the gods that your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt," as well as "the gods of the Amorites" — another term for Canaanites. This directive was based on the prohibitions of idolatry found in Moses' law in passages like Deuteronomy 11:28. In addition to this, when Joshua declared in verse 19 that "[The Lord] is a holy God. He is a jealous God," Joshua drew from portions of the Pentateuch like Exodus 20:5. Our author left no doubt in the minds of his original audience. The law of Moses was the standard that they must observe if they hoped to see the blessings of God.

God's Supernatural Power

In the fourth place, this chapter on covenant renewal also stressed God's supernatural power. Our author did this most vividly in Joshua's speech and Israel's responses as Joshua reported what God had said concerning his benevolence toward Israel. In verses 3-6a, God spoke in the first person and listed a number of things he had done for Israel. For instance, in verse 3, he said, "I took your father Abraham ... and led him through all the land of Canaan, and made his offspring many." In verse 5, he said, "I plagued Egypt." From verse 6b-7, Joshua added his own elaborations on what God had done for Israel. In verse 7, Joshua related that when the Egyptians pursued the Israelites to the sea, God "made the sea come upon them and cover them." In verses 8-13, the text returns to the first person. In verse 8, God said, "I gave [the Amorites] into your hand ... I destroyed them." And in verse 12, with regard to the conquest of Canaan, God told Israel, "It was not by your sword or by your bow."

In addition to this, the responses of Israel to Joshua's words focused on God's supernatural power. In verse 17, the people confessed that, in Egypt, God did "great signs in our sight" and that God "preserved us in all the way that we went." And in verse 18, they agreed that, "The Lord drove out before us all the peoples." But Joshua also warned Israel in verse 20, "If you forsake the Lord ... he will ... do you harm and consume you."

These declarations of God's supernatural power reminded the original audience of the kind of God they served. He was the God of power and should never be ignored. His ability to bless and to curse was beyond measure. And because of this, they must always remain loyal to his covenant.

When we look at God's relationship with the people of Israel, one of the things that comes out clearly is that he blesses them in supernatural ways over and over again. And I think there's a real purpose behind that that helps them to be able to maintain their relationship with God and their loyalty to the covenant... The supernatural blessings that he pours out upon them, I think, is the

best way in the long run for people to continually be reminded, this is a God who loves us, who cares for us, who will never leave or forsake us, and because of that love that we've received from God, we turn around and continue to love him and stay loyal to that relationship.

— Dr. Dan Lacich

All Israel

And finally, in the fifth place, Joshua's covenant renewal begins and ends with references to the participation of all Israel. In Joshua's opening summons in verse 1, "all the tribes of Israel ... the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel" attended. And the account closes in verse 28 with Joshua's dismissal of "every man to his inheritance."

All Israel came to the assembly, renewed covenant, and left to settle in the inheritances God had given them. Our author's purpose for his audience is clear enough. Because this was true in Joshua's day, everyone in the original audience was to renew covenant in their day as well.

So far in this lesson on covenant loyalty, we've looked at the significance of covenant warnings and covenant renewal for the original audience of the book of Joshua. Now we should turn to our third main topic in this lesson, Christian applications of this division of our book. How are you and I to apply these matters to our lives as followers of Christ today?

CHRISTIAN APPLICATION

The last major division of our book called the original audience to reflect on the dynamics of their covenant with God, especially the requirement of loyalty and the consequences of curses they would face for disloyalty. Joshua himself would have had in view God's covenants with Abraham and Moses. And later Old Testament audiences also would have considered God's covenant with David. But how do these emphases pertain to God's covenant with us today?

As Christians, our relationship with God is governed primarily by what the prophet Jeremiah, Jesus and New Testament authors called the "new covenant." Unfortunately, many sincere followers of Christ have understood the new covenant in ways that make it very difficult to relate this portion of Joshua to Christian living. So, we need to pause for a moment and reflect on what Jeremiah predicted about the new covenant and how New Testament authors understood its fulfillment in Christ.

Listen to what the prophet Jeremiah said in Jeremiah 31:31-32:

Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like

the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord (Jeremiah 31:31-32).

This passage announces that after the Babylonian exile God would make “a new covenant” — or “renewed covenant,” as it may be translated — with “the house,” or people, “of Israel” and “the house,” or people, “of Judah.”

Jeremiah spent much of his ministry announcing that Judah was about to suffer defeat and exile at the hands of the Babylonians. But in Jeremiah 31, he began with the announcement that “the days are coming.” Elsewhere in this chapter the expression “the days are coming” refers to the time when God’s blessings would be poured out on Israel after the Babylonian exile.

Now, it’s important to note that this new covenant would not be like the covenant God made with their ancestors in Moses’ day. As we’ve seen in Joshua 23, 24, if Israel flagrantly violated their covenant with God by turning to idolatry, they would suffer the consequences of hardships and a period of exile from the Promised Land.

Sadly, Israel did break covenant with God and they suffered under the tyranny of Gentile nations for hundreds of years. But Jeremiah gave Israel hope that, after the exile, God would show mercy and establish a new covenant. In Jeremiah 31:33-34, God ensured that this new covenant would not end in failure like the covenant with Moses. Here we read:

I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, “Know the Lord,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more (Jeremiah 31:33-34).

In effect, these verses explain that the new covenant would not fail because God would thoroughly transform his people so that they would be loyal to him. He would “put [his] law within them, and [would] write it on their hearts.”

As passages like Deuteronomy 30:10 indicate, having hearts attuned to God’s law was always the ideal for the people of God. And, by God’s grace, there was always a remnant of faithful Israelites who moved toward this ideal. But Jeremiah 31 predicted that when the new covenant came into full effect, spiritual renewal would be complete — not just for a few, but for every individual counted among the people of God.

Here we see a striking contrast with the days of Joshua. When the new covenant comes in its fullness, there will no longer be any need to call God’s people to be loyal to God. They will all be perfectly loyal. God “will forgive their iniquity, and ... will remember their sin no more.”

The promise in Jeremiah and the promise in Ezekiel was that God would write the laws on our heart and make us to walk in his ways, put his Spirit in us, and he would forgive our sins. And so, the new

covenant is like the old covenant in that it's ratified by blood, but as the book of Hebrews makes clear, it's a better covenant because it's the covenant made with the blood of God's own Son, not bulls and goats that could not ultimately remove sins. So, it's a wonderful thing to be living under the new covenant and to have the blessings and knowing these things at a level that they probably simply did not know in the Old Testament times.

— Pastor Doug McConnell

It isn't difficult to see that Jeremiah's description of the new covenant raises crucial questions for you and me as followers of Christ. If there's no need to call the people of the new covenant to loyal service, then why is the New Testament filled with calls to obedience? If there's no need for warnings about the consequences of curses, then why does the New Testament warn those who are tempted to turn from Christ?

To answer these questions, we must return to what we've seen throughout this series about Christ's fulfillment of the book of Joshua. As you'll recall, the New Testament teaches that Christ fulfills the goals of Israel's victorious conquest and tribal inheritances in three phases or stages. He began his grand fulfillment of these goals in the *inauguration* of his kingdom during his first advent. He goes on fulfilling them in the *continuation* of his kingdom throughout church history. And he will complete their fulfillment at the *consummation* of his kingdom when he returns in glory. This pattern of fulfillment is important because Christ fulfills Joshua's call for covenant loyalty in these three stages as well.

We'll explore Christian applications of this final division of Joshua in our usual way by sketching what the New Testament teaches about covenant loyalty in each stage. Let's begin with covenant loyalty in the inauguration of Christ's kingdom.

INAUGURATION

We know with certainty that the age of the new covenant began with Christ's first advent. In Luke 22:20, Jesus himself spoke of "the new covenant in my blood." In Hebrews 8:6, we read that Jesus is the mediator of the new covenant. And in 2 Corinthians 3:6, the apostle Paul spoke of himself and his companions as "ministers of a new covenant."

At the Last Supper, the Lord Jesus in the Gospels explained that his sacrificial death had significance at two levels. Yes, it was an atoning sacrifice in which he suffered the wrath of the holy God for our sins in our place so that we could escape it, but he also described his death as a covenant-initiating sacrifice. His blood initiated the new covenant, he says in Matthew and Luke very clearly. So, his death is that sacrifice that brings about the new covenant era.

— Dr. Charles L. Quarles

The New Testament highlights two ways in which Christ inaugurated the new covenant. On the one side, it emphasizes Jesus' work as the Messiah. Israel had suffered for hundreds of years under the curse of exile that Joshua warned would come against them. And the Father sent Jesus as an incomparable act of benevolence and mercy. The second person of the Trinity was incarnated as the great Son of David who perfectly fulfilled the requirement of covenant loyalty to God — even to the point of dying and making atonement for the sins of all who truly believe in him. And for this service, God granted him the blessings of resurrection and ascension into heaven as the supreme ruler over all. The New Testament also adds that true believers are now “in Christ,” in the sense that they are identified with Christ in the court of heaven. We are seated in heaven, reigning with Christ in glory.

But on the other side, Jesus' wonderful work when he inaugurated his kingdom did not bring the church on earth to the perfection that Jeremiah prophesied for the new covenant. In the first-century church, there were still “false brothers,” as Paul called them in 2 Corinthians 11:26 and Galatians 2:4. And if they didn't repent, the false brothers were doomed to suffer the eternal judgment of God. But for true believers, we are not only “in Christ,” but Christ is in us through the Holy Spirit as we live on the earth. And the Holy Spirit leads true believers in a lifelong process of sanctification in which we are, in the words of 2 Corinthians 7:1, “bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God.”

This earthly reality explains why Jesus and New Testament authors frequently emphasized covenant dynamics during the first century in ways that were very similar to Joshua's warnings in his speeches. Much like Joshua led Israel into covenant renewal, Jesus and his apostles ordained the regular preaching of the Word and the Lord's Supper as means of covenant renewal in the new covenant.

Time and again, they highlighted God's benevolences. But they also called the church to respond with loyalty to God. In the well-known words of Romans 12:2, they insisted, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind.” And they also frequently warned the visible church in their day of the severe consequences of God's judgment on those who turned from Christ. As we read in Hebrews 10:29, “How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified?” Much like the covenant warnings Joshua issued in his day, these and similar New Testament passages exhorted false brothers to come to saving faith. And they exhorted true believers to continue in faithful service to God.

In this light, it's not difficult to see how the five themes of the last chapters of Joshua apply to the inauguration of the new covenant. When we see divine authority emphasized in the last division of Joshua, we're reminded of Christ's supreme display of divine authority in his first advent. When we encounter the dynamics of God's covenant in the record of Joshua, we're reminded of how Christ established the dynamics of the new covenant. Joshua's emphasis on the standard of Moses' law should turn our hearts toward Christ's perfect obedience and his call for his followers to live according to God's law in light of the new covenant. And Joshua's reflections on God's supernatural power toward Israel should lead us to acknowledge the supernatural power displayed in the inauguration of Christ's kingdom. Lastly, the focus on the unity of all Israel in this

portion of Joshua should remind us of how Jesus and his apostles and prophets called for the unity of the church.

Following these Christian applications associated with covenant loyalty and the inauguration of Christ's kingdom, we should turn to how Joshua's warnings and call for covenant renewal apply to the continuation of God's people throughout church history.

CONTINUATION

When we compare the kingdom of Christ in the first century with his kingdom today, it's clear that the ascended Christ has accomplished much. Over the last two millennia, as he has ruled over heaven and earth, his church has spread further and further around the world. And it continues to spread even in our own day. But despite the victories won by the ascended Christ against his enemies, Joshua's emphases in his call to covenant loyalty apply to the church in every age.

On the one side, Christ himself still reigns in heaven and continues to represent his people in the heavenly court. We are "in Christ," and God still imputes Christ's righteousness to every person who comes to saving faith in him so that their eternal blessings are secure in him. And more than this, even when we sin, Christ pleads on our behalf before the throne of God. In the words of Hebrews 7:25, "[Christ] is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them."

But on the other side, the church of Christ on earth continues to be far from perfect. We must always remind the church of the words of Hebrews 12:14, "Strive for . . . the holiness without which no one will see the Lord." There are still those who profess faith but are "false brothers," and only have what theologians often call "hypocritical" or "temporary" faith. In fact, apostasy in the church has grown to great proportions from time to time, and we are right to proclaim warnings like 1 Corinthians 10:12: "Let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall."

Of course, by God's mercy there's always a remnant of true believers in whom Christ dwells by his Spirit. But even they undergo temporary hardships as discipline from God. As Jesus explained to the church of Laodicea in Revelation 3:19, "Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent."

The way God shows his love for his people is by sending discipline into their lives in this world... So, while it's wonderful that Jesus took the eternal curses on himself when he died on the cross, it's also a wonderful gift from God that while we live in this life, God has not removed all troubles, all trials, all discipline, even all curses of his covenant on those who truly believe, because that's his instrument, that's his tool for leading us into the ways of holiness and the ways of righteousness, so that the increase of our blessings in the world to come will be evident day by day.

— Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

It's clear then that the themes of the last division of the book of Joshua speak to the church throughout the continuation of Christ's kingdom. Divine authority in this portion of Joshua reminds us of the authority of Christ over our churches and our individual lives today. The dynamics of God's covenant in Joshua call us to apply the dynamics of the new covenant in Christ as we acknowledge God's benevolence, offer him our loyalty, and receive the consequences of his covenants. When we read of Joshua's emphasis on the standard of Moses' law, we should look to both the Old and New Testaments — always in light of what Christ has accomplished — to guide us in our daily lives. And just as Joshua reflected on God's supernatural power toward Israel, we should rejoice in the supernatural power God displays to his church through Jesus, even today. And, of course, the focus on all Israel in this portion of Joshua calls on us to promote the unity of all of God's covenant people in Christ as the church spreads everywhere throughout the world.

As we've seen, Christian application of the last division of the book of Joshua focuses on what Christ accomplished in the inauguration of his kingdom and in its continuation in our own day. But it also applies to the consummation of his kingdom when Christ will bring these matters to their complete fulfillment.

CONSUMMATION

On the one side, when Christ returns in glory he himself will gain his full inheritance for his perfect covenant loyalty in the new heaven and new earth. In Revelation 11:15, we read that at that time, "The kingdom of the world [will] become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever." And in the words of Philippians 2:11, "Every tongue [will] confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

And on the other side, when Christ returns, the church and the world will be utterly purified and glorified. The blessings from God's common grace that unbelievers received in this life will increase their eternal judgment. And the curses they experienced in this life will be but preludes to the eternal judgment they will endure. But those who have exercised saving faith in Christ will share with him in the new creation. Every blessing they received in this life will be but a prelude to the glories that will be theirs. And the temporary curses of discipline that they endured in this life will yield for them a great reward. As James put it in 1:12 of his book, "Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life." On that day, the promise of the new covenant will be fulfilled completely. As we read in Revelation 22:3, "No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him."

The themes of the last division of Joshua offer us great hope as we look forward to the consummation of Christ's kingdom. The display of divine authority in this portion of Joshua reminds us that the hope we have in Christ is backed by God's full authority. Joshua's focus on God's covenant calls us to rejoice that, one day, we'll share in the full reward of Christ's perfect loyalty. We can be encouraged knowing that the standard of

Moses' law emphasized in Joshua will be fulfilled in our perfect obedience to God's will as we are united with Christ in the new creation. And Joshua's attention to God's supernatural power toward Israel moves us to reflect on the incomparable display of Christ's power that we'll see when he returns. Finally, the theme of all Israel highlighted in this portion of Joshua calls us to celebrate that, at the consummation of Christ's kingdom, the new world will be filled with God's faithful people who will worship and serve him with unending joy.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson on Israel's covenant loyalty, we've explored the last major division of the book of Joshua. We've seen how Joshua's covenant warnings called on the original audience to render loyal service and warned of judgment for disloyalty. We've seen how Israel's covenant renewal showed the original audience how to renew covenant with God in their own day as well. And we've noted how Christian application of this portion of Joshua must be rooted in the ways Christ fulfills the goal of Israel's covenant loyalty in the inauguration, continuation and consummation of his kingdom.

The last division of Joshua revealed the grand significance of the entire book for its original audience. God had blessed his people with a victorious conquest and had allotted enduring inheritances to the tribes of Israel. And these demonstrations of divine benevolence were to lead the original audience of our book to respond with covenant loyalty. God's judgment will come against those who fail to respond to him with faith and service. But great reward awaits all who respond to God's mercy with humble devotion. And the same is true for you and me. In Christ, we have seen the greatest display of God's grace. God offers eternal victory and eternal inheritance in the new heaven and new earth in Christ. And this offer will be fulfilled to everyone who comes in saving faith to the Savior.

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