

# Joshua

Lesson 18

## Chapter 23

As we move into Chapter 23, much time has passed since Joshua dismissed the whole congregation allowing them to make their new homes on their land in their tribal area in the Promised Land. Joshua had fulfilled his duty and charge to take the Promised Land and divide it among the nation. But, as the days pass, everyone becomes older, and the body becomes frail. Such is the case with Joshua.

### III. The Great Encouragement of Joshua's Command (23:1-24:33)

#### A. A Message for Israel (23:1-5)

##### 1. The LORD Had Given Rest (23:1-2)

We saw the great beginning of Joshua's command and the great campaign of Joshua's command. Now we come to the great encouragement of Joshua's command. As Moses had an encouraging message for Israel, so, too, Joshua has an encouraging message for Israel. To begin, the writer reminds us that the LORD had given rest to the nation for many days. Chapter 23, verse 1. *"Now it came about after many days, when the LORD had given rest to Israel from all their enemies on every side, and Joshua was old, advanced in years, <sup>2</sup> that Joshua called for all Israel, for their elders and their heads and their judges and their officers, and said to them, "I am old, advanced in years."* (23:1-2)

How old was Joshua when he released the congregation at Shiloh? No one really knows; however, we should be able to determine his age by the information we have in the Bible. In Numbers 11:28, we learn that Joshua had been "... *the attendant of Moses from his youth...*" At that point in the Scripture, the nation of Israel had only been out of Egypt for a little more than a year; therefore, Joshua had only known Moses for a little more than a year. In just a little more than a year out of Egypt, Joshua was chosen to be one of the twelve spies. Upon return, unlike Caleb, who voted to enter the Promised Land at that time and received a promise that he would live to enter the land while all the others twenty-years of age and older would die, Joshua did not receive the same promise because he was not yet twenty years of age. Twenty years of age seemed to be the point where youth became adults at that time. Today, Jews celebrate the *bar mitzvah* of a male at the age of thirteen. It is the symbolic time when the child becomes a man, and the father is released from the responsibility of the child's sins. First, this goes against the law delivered by Moses because no one is responsible for the sins of someone else. Second, the *bar mitzvah* is not found in the Bible anywhere. Third, the *bar mitzvah* is a creation of Rabbinic Judaism, first seen two hundred years after the Temple's destruction in 70 AD. Even at that, the *bar mitzvah* did not take hold in Judaism until the Middle Ages. Therefore, reading into the Scripture, the idea that a youth becomes a man at age thirteen is incorrect. Joshua was probably reaching the age of nineteen when he was a spy. Forty years later, he would be about sixty when he became the leader of the nation of Israel. He was about sixty-five when he finished his great campaign to take the Promised Land and sent the whole congregation to live on their inheritance. We will learn in the next chapter that Joshua will die at the age of one hundred and ten years of age. More than likely, this meeting that Joshua has called, occurred when he was "*advanced in years*" but not near his death age. If Joshua was sixty when he

became leader of Israel, he served in that position for about fifty years; Moses only served for forty years.

## 2. The LORD Has Been Fighting (23:3)

However, the writer is about to indicate that Joshua called this meeting but a few years after he had released the congregation to inherit their lands, cities, and villages. He does so by mentioning how the LORD has been fighting for the nation. Verse 3. *“And you have seen all that the LORD your God has done to all these nations because of you, for the LORD your God is He who has been fighting for you.”* (23:3)

Surely, all the *“elders and their heads and their judges and their officers”* called by Joshua would have consisted basically of the same men who first inherited the land upon the division. They had seen the LORD fighting for the nation. But if this message was forty or fifty years later, a whole new set of *elders and their heads and their judges and their officers* would have been in place who had not seen the victories in the campaign because they would have been too young to be in the army. It seems more likely that this meeting was only a few years after the disbursement from Shiloh because of what the writer says next.

## 3. The LORD Will Thrust Out (23:4-5)

With the dismissal of all the tribes at Shiloh, for the congregation to begin living on their land, some of the areas had not been cleared of the Canaanites, and that was the order from the LORD. In the land division, Joshua gave the land to the tribes knowing that each tribe would still need to fight to take some of their lands. Joshua promised the LORD would thrust out the remaining inhabitants. Verse 4. *“See, I have apportioned to you these nations which remain as an inheritance for your tribes, with all the nations which I have cut off, from the Jordan even to the Great Sea toward the setting of the sun. The LORD your God, He will thrust them out from before you and drive them from before you; and you will possess their land, just as the LORD your God promised you.”* (23:4-5)

When Joshua says, *“He will thrust them out from before you and drive them from before you; and you will possess their land,”* it is a clear indication that the tribes must do their part, be in the active position of attempting to remove the Canaanites, and, then, the LORD will trust the people out in front of their eyes. But this charge from Joshua came with a condition. It is not a new condition. It is the same condition Moses gave to the nation of Israel before they crossed the Jordan River.

### B. A Warning for Israel (23:6-16)

#### 1. You Must Keep the Law and Stay Straight (23:6)

From the message for Israel, we come to the warning for Israel. Joshua tells the nation you must keep the law and stay straight. Verse 6. *“Be very firm, then, to keep and do all that is written in the book of the law of Moses, so that you may not turn aside from it to the right hand or to the left”* (23:6).

Simply put, keep the law and the covenant with the LORD.

Many years ago, in 1983, I had the privilege of serving on staff at Long Point Baptist Church in the Spring Branch section of Houston, Texas. It was a great church in many ways. At that time, it was the home to the oldest private non-Catholic school in Houston have long passed fifty years by that time. The membership was made up of wealthy and influential businessmen and their families. The volunteer leaders of the Sunday School organization were presidents and vice-presidents in companies such as Texaco, Gulf Oil, Humble/Exxon, Pennzoil, Mobile, Tenneco, and more. Back in those days, credit cards were new, and Charlie Simmons was the president of the new credit card division of Exxon. Another man was an old bi-vocational preacher who developed a special oil additive that, when added to the engine, the motor could run for hours without cooling water and without overheating. He was the only one who knew the exact formula. He loved me. I loved him. I always called him preacher. He was the father-in-law of our Minister of Education. I do not remember his name. Nevertheless, he was always watching me. He called at 8:00 AM every workday morning to see if I was in the office doing my job – knowing the other staff were lazy and would not

be in until after 9:00 AM. “Jim, this is preacher, just checking to see if you are in yet. You are. Good man! I’m here, preacher. Thanks for the call.” But, because of him, I was always at work before 8:00 AM waiting for his call. He would scrutinize every word I said, every word I wrote, every program I planned, every function I held. His scrutiny always came after the fact and in the most loving way. He taught me how to treat people in the loving way he treated me. About four years into the ministry, I asked him why he was so involved in my ministry and the things I did. He told me he was on the team who brought me to the church. He was the one who researched my background. He was the one who knew my faults, my dysfunctions, but he also saw my calling from the LORD. He also knew that my father had died when I was eleven, and I had not had a father figure in my life. He was right. Other men such as Benton Cain, T.D Matthews, Cyril Rhoades, and Joe McMahan, all now with the LORD, had tried to be father figures in my life, but their time was so limited. This man was in my life every day for the entire time at this church. At the close of my ministry there, I sat with him at lunch one day. It was then that he said to me, “It has been a privilege to watch over you these five years. When you came to Long Point, you were all over the road, metaphorically swerving and swaying from ditch to ditch. Now you are driving straight in your ministry. That was my purpose in taking a personal interest in your life. I felt it was the LORD’s will for me to help you learn to “stay in between the furrows of the rows.” I asked him, “What does that mean?” He told me when plowing the field with a tractor, rows of soil are scrapped with tractor blades to form raised beds in long rows. The wheels of the tractor ran in the little valleys between each long row. Those valleys are called furrows. Learning to drive the tractor properly meant that you could keep the tractor’s wheels in the “furrows of the rows.” Damage to the crops would be done if the wheels did not stay in those furrows. It was his desire to train me in ministry to keep my wheels in between the furrows of the rows. In this case, the law of Moses was the field with its rows and furrows. Joshua was warning the nation’s people to keep the wheels of their spiritual lives in between the furrows of the rows. Leaving the furrows would cause sincere and significant damage to the rows of the fields of the spiritual lives of the people of Israel.

### 2. You Must Disassociate from Nations and Their Gods (23:7)

Joshua warns that you must disassociate from other nations and their gods. Verse 7. “...so that you will not associate with these nations, these which remain among you, or mention the name of their gods, or make anyone swear by them, or serve them, or bow down to them.” (23:7)

This warning reminds the nation to keep the first of the Ten Commandments. *You shall have no other gods before me.*

The word “associate” should not be quickly overlooked. The Hebrew for “...so that you will not associate” would be better said, “lest you go with these nations.” The LORD did not want any Canaanites left in the land. He had made that completely clear. He did not want one Israelite in the company of a single Canaanite. For that, many Israelites will falter in the future and not limited to King David, King Solomon, and all the people below them.

### 3. You Must Cling to the LORD Your God (23:8)

Joshua warns that you must cling to the LORD your God. Verse 8. “But you are to cling to the LORD your God, as you have done to this day.” (23:8)

Here, Joshua adds a commendation to the warning. He knows that to this point in the story, with the taking of the Promised Land under his authority, the tribes have indeed continued to cling to the LORD. Therefore, their standing with the LORD is still good. Now they need to complete their tasks in that same standing.

The word “cling” in this passage is especially appropriate. It means to *hold fast, to adhere closely, to stick together*. Sticking to the LORD would assure that the LORD would stick with His people.

#### 4. You Must Love the LORD Your God (23:9-16)

##### a) For He Has Fought for Israel (23:9-11)

Joshua's warning continues by saying you must love the LORD your God, for He has fought for Israel. Verse 9. *"For the LORD has driven out great and strong nations from before you; and as for you, no man has stood before you to this day. <sup>10</sup> One of your men puts to flight a thousand, for the LORD your God is He who fights for you, just as He promised you. <sup>11</sup> So take diligent heed to yourselves to love the LORD your God."* (23:9-11)

Joshua's warning in this passage was a reminder of what the LORD had done for the nation in the past.

##### b) For He Will Fight Against Israel (23:12-13)

Joshua's warning turns to the reminder of the promise that the LORD will fight against Israel if you do not cling to Him. *"For if you ever go back and cling to the rest of these nations, these which remain among you, and intermarry with them, so that you associate with them and they with you, <sup>13</sup> know with certainty that the LORD your God will not continue to drive these nations out from before you; but they will be a snare and a trap to you, and a whip on your sides and thorns in your eyes, until you perish from off this good land which the LORD your God has given you."* (23:12-13)

Leaving the faithful LORD for any reason is a disastrous decision. Do not associate with other nations with other gods. Do not marry into families who worship other gods. Why? They will become a trap, and you will turn from clinging to the One true God. Then He will turn from you, and you will lose your land.

##### c) For He Has Been Faithful to Israel (23:14)

Joshua warns that He has been faithful to Israel. Verse 14. *"Now behold, today I am going the way of all the earth, and you know in all your hearts and in all your souls that not one word of all the good words which the LORD your God spoke concerning you has failed; all have been fulfilled for you, not one of them has failed."* (23:14)

What is the "way of all the earth?" In the "way of the earth," since the sin of Adam, all humans grow older, and all humans will eventually die. It is simply the "way of the earth." Joshua is not saying that he is dying. He is saying that he is getting older and one day he will die. He may be implying that it will not be many more years before he will not be the nation's head because he will die one day.

However, Joshua's point in this warning is that the LORD has been faithful through all the years of his life and the life of the nation of Israel, and He will continue to be faithful. His words have been true and faithful. We must remember one thing at this point. The LORD gave promises that He will keep that were two edges of His Own sword. If the nation of Israel was faithful to the LORD, His sword would strike in her favor against her enemies. If the nation of Israel was unfaithful to the LORD, His sword would strike against the nation in punishment. That comes next.

##### d) For He Will Burn Against Israel (23:15-16)

Joshua warns that if Israel is unfaithful, He will burn against Israel. Verse 15. *"It shall come about that just as all the good words which the LORD your God spoke to you have come upon you, so the LORD will bring upon you all the threats, until He has destroyed you from off this good land which the LORD your God has given you. <sup>16</sup> When 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 burn against you, and you will perish quickly from off the good land which He has given you."* (23:15-16)

These same points were made by Moses in the last chapters of the Book of Deuteronomy. It was not a new message. They were part of the portions of the law found in Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers. The people of Israel had heard them for more than forty years from the lips of Moses and Joshua. Nothing new here. But the placement of these words is appropriate. They will keep the nation loyal to the LORD, at least during the lives of Joshua and all the people who heard them spoken by Moses and Joshua. However, when all of them have died, the nation will begin to allow its grip on the LORD to slip. Little by little, the people will engage in sins here and there. That is

how sin words. A little at the beginning until it becomes comfortable. Once it becomes comfortable, sin becomes the norm of the culture. Once it becomes the norm of the culture, it becomes expected of everyone. Once it is expected of everyone, it is no longer considered a sin, even though the Word of God still says it is a sin. Then, the ones who expect sin of everyone will attack the written Word of God and seek to discredit it. In the attempt to discredit it, many souls are lost from the saving message of the LORD. So, it shall be, as we will see in the Book of Judges. Sin will begin little by little. In 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel, the new King Saul will dabble in sin. In 2<sup>nd</sup> Samuel, King David will struggle with sin. In 1<sup>st</sup> Kings, in less than four hundred and forty years from this story, King Solomon will bring the people into full-blown sin. In the rest of that book and 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings, sin will reign in the nation, breaking the covenant of the LORD and the commands of the LORD among the twelve tribes daily. The LORD will be patient, but He will burn against Israel, and she will lose her land completely. Her end of ownership of the land is assured even at the beginning of their ownership – it is all in this warning of Joshua.