

Be Careful to Love Your Savior: Joshua 23

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It's good to be back. Thank you to Cam Riviere and Mike Schellhase for preaching the past 2 Sundays while our family was away on vacation. We return this morning to our study of Joshua, and we just have 2 chapters left. We'll study chapter 23 this morning and chapter 24 next Sunday, and then we'll move on to a sermon series on God's Meaning in Marriage.

I entitled this sermon, "Be Careful to Love Your Savior" because I think that's the main gist of what Joshua wants to communicate in this speech to the Hebrew leaders. He is near the end of his life, and he gives this weighty admonition to them, exhorting them to cling to the Lord and not to stray from Him. This is a powerful moment in the history of Israel. It is a powerful speech from a great leader. And there's much for us to learn.

We'll start by thinking generally about these words of wisdom from an elderly saint. Then we'll look more closely at the two sides of Joshua's counsel. On the one side, it's the need to cultivate love for God. On the other side is the need to resist idolatrous loves. And really these 2 efforts happen in tandem. They're like 2 sides of the same coin.

Words of Wisdom from an Elderly Saint

The first phrase in chapter 23 sets these last two chapters apart chronologically from the previous chapters. This is now a long time afterward. God has brought the Israelites, miraculously, into the Promised Land. They crossed the Jordan River and defeated city after city, all by the amazing power of God who fought for them.

To try to estimate the timeframe here, we can remember back in chapter 14 Caleb had spoken and said that he had been 40 years old when he was sent (with Joshua) to spy out the Promised Land. And he said that 45 years had passed between that time and when they settled in the land. So Caleb was 85 at that point, when he received his inheritance in the land.

In chapter 24 we find out that Joshua was 110 when he died. It's probably safe to assume that Joshua and Caleb were roughly the same age. So that opening phrase of chapter 23, "a long time afterward" probably reflects a timespan of about 25 years, based on Caleb being 85 when they all settled in the land

and Joshua now being near his death at age 110. The people have settled in the land, they've now lived there for a couple decades, and now Joshua is nearing his death and is giving some final words to the leaders and to the people.

Let's just think about the magnitude of these final 2 speeches. Just think about the significance of Joshua's leadership role. Chapter 1 highlights what an important position the Lord gave to Joshua. The tremendous leader Moses had died. And the Lord called up Joshua to take Moses' place. Now, at the end of the book, Joshua has led the people for many decades. He led them through many challenges, through many battles. The Lord was abundantly faithful and gracious to give them success.

If you think about all that Joshua experienced throughout his long life, all that he experienced in his amazing journey of faith, all that he experienced in leading others to follow the Lord, it gives an immense weight to his final words. These are his departing words. It would be hard to overstate the gravity of what's going on here.

I want to mention 2 points of application as we're still just thinking generally about these words of wisdom from an elderly saint.

Leave a Legacy

One way that this lands on me is it creates a desire within me to be that elderly saint someday who can impart wisdom to younger generations. This scene stirs inside of me an intense longing to have a legacy that I can leave behind whenever my time on this earth is done. I'm not counting on making it to 110. But however many years God gives me, I want to have a legacy to leave. I want to be able to speak words of wisdom to my children (and, Lord willing, someday my grandchildren, and maybe even great-grandchildren) as well as to other believers and to unbelievers. I want to have a message to share that will be strengthened and validated by a long life of faithfulness to God, a long life bearing witness to God's grace to me.

I hope you want that too. It's a gracious thing that God gives us these inspiring examples. Here's a guy we can look at and identify with to some extent, and we can say, "I know Joshua wasn't perfect, and I certainly know that I'm not perfect. But God was gracious to this man and caused him to persevere all those years as a godly leader." And then it can become a prayer, "God will you please do that for me too? Keep me on the straight and narrow. Please don't let me wander. Allow my life to be a

testimony to Your grace, and to be a testimony that will be increasingly beautiful and compelling with each passing decade.”

Learn from Others

The other application here is to recognize what a blessing it is to the church for there to be older, godly men and women in our midst. Don't take that for granted. If you're a younger believer, you should recognize the wealth of wisdom that is available to you through the saints in this church who have experienced decades of both trials and triumphs.

Are you confused about something pertaining to the Christian life? Are you struggling with a particular temptation or sin? Are you wrestling with a difficult decision? Don't go it alone. Ask for help and guidance, and particularly seek out the counsel of older, wiser saints.

My parents became Christians when I was a young child, and I can remember back to some of the individuals who mentored my parents. There was a man named Carl Shaeffer who kind of took my dad under his wing. They were good friends, and I think my dad learned a lot from Carl. There was also an older woman named Betty Keade who was influential in my mom's life, and who also babysat us kids from time to time. She had a very evident love for the Lord, and it was contagious. She was prayerful and joyful and a wonderful servant.

The godly wisdom of those older saints, and many others like them, had a huge impact on my mom and dad who were young parents at the time, young believers. And it even had an impact on me as a young child.

I also think of men I looked up to during my college years and beyond. Of course, someone doesn't have to be 110 to be a mentor. They don't have to be nearing death. I can think of guys who are a little older than me or a lot older than me who have been able to give me a perspective on things that I haven't been able to see from my vantage point.

I remember in college meeting together with a graduate student who was willing to hang out with a young undergrad like me and talk about whatever. He was going into missions. I had felt called into ministry of some kind. At that point I was also wondering if God might be calling me to a life of singleness as I pursued a life of ministry, and I was able to talk that through with this man. He wasn't that much older than me, but still he was able to shed light on things I was wrestling with.

There have been pastors and professors whom I have gone to over the years who have been able to give me wise advice. And I think of the many things I've learned from mature saints in this congregation. What a rich asset we have to be in fellowship with older, wiser men and women who can speak into our lives from a position of having more life experience, having experienced the grace of God for longer than we have.

So as we consider Joshua, the elderly saint, I would encourage you to reflect on these two application points. Aspire to be that elderly saint, and also avail yourself of the benefits of having older, mature believers around you.

Cultivating Love for God

Now let's delve into the actual content of what Joshua shares here. And there are two important pieces to it. One way to think of it would be offense and defense. There is an offensive, proactive pursuit of God (cultivating love for God). And then the defensive piece, which is to resist idolatrous loves. Positively we need to nurture a growing passion for God and satisfaction in Him. At the same time, stating it negatively, we must cut off the temptations to be satisfied in idols. Let's look at each of these in turn.

Read Joshua 23:6-13

These verses hearken back to the Lord's words to Joshua in chapter 1.

“Only be strong and very courageous, being careful to do according to all the law that Moses my servant commanded you. Do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, that you may have good success wherever you go.” (Joshua 1:7, ESV)

And Joshua's command to the people in chapter 22 is also very similar.

“Only be very careful to observe the commandment and the law that Moses the servant of the LORD commanded you, to love the LORD your God, and to walk in all his ways and to keep his commandments and to cling to him and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul.” (Joshua 22:5, ESV)

Cling to Him

Notice that word “cling to him” that's also used in verse 8 of our passage, “but you shall *cling* to the Lord your God.” And it's used again in the warning of verse 12, “For if you turn back

and *cling* to the remnant of these nations remaining among you . . .” Here are the two paths. To whom will you cling? Will you cling to the Lord, or to idols?

The word has a powerful imagery. It’s like soldering something together, or gluing it tightly. The word is used in another place to speak of a man holding tightly to his sword in the midst of battle (2 Samuel 23:10). It’s the same word used in Genesis 2:24 of the husband holding fast to his wife, cleaving to his wife, clinging to her.

Hezekiah was a king who served as a great example of clinging to the Lord. “He trusted in the LORD, the God of Israel, so that there was none like him among all the kings of Judah after him, nor among those who were before him. For he *held fast* to the LORD. He did not depart from following him, but kept the commandments that the LORD commanded Moses.” (2 Kings 18:5–6, ESV)

So as you think about this admonition to cling to the Lord, understand that this is not a casual thing. It’s not a half-hearted or nonchalant commitment. There is fierceness to this clinging. It’s like we’re holding on for our very lives. As I described the meaning of this word to our kids the other day, Noah used the imagery of hanging on to the edge of a cliff lest you fall. That’s a great picture.

We must cling to the Lord our God. We must hold fast to Him, hold tightly to Him. Why? Because He is our only hope. He is the powerful One who wins our battles.

That’s what Joshua reminds them of in verses 9-10. The Lord has fought for them and given them success. Thinking of the big picture for the Israelites, the message is to cling to the One who rescued you from slavery in Egypt and has now given you this great inheritance of land. Hold tightly to your Savior.

The message for us is the same. Cling to your Savior. Hold fast to the One who made provision for your sin by sending His Son to die on the cross, and then raised Him from the dead on the third day. Trust in Him. Trust in His Son, Jesus Christ. Trust in His sacrifice for us. Hold on to Him, because He’s the only one who can save you. To cling to anything else is foolishness, because it will crumble. Our Savior Jesus Christ is a strong rock, immovable and secure. To cling to worldly things would be like hanging over the side of that cliff with your fingers wrapped around the root of a tree, and that root is about to snap. Be mindful of what you’re clinging to. Where is your security? Where is your

hope? Don't cling to idols. Don't cling to the world. Cling to the Lord your God.

The other strong exhortation that I want to point out here is in verse 11. "Be very careful to love the Lord your God."

Relationship

I think this is such a beautiful command, because it highlights the relationship that is involved. This is not just about doing a list of chores for an employer. This is about a deeply loving relationship between God and His people. He has shown His love for us in saving us. Mike preached on the theme of God's amazing love last Sunday from Romans 5. And in response to that immense love we love Him. Love has been shown to us through Jesus' death on the cross. We respond with love toward Him.

But, you know, it can be a struggle to cultivate our love for God. That's why Joshua gives this sobering command. "Be very careful to love the Lord your God." Why would this be difficult? Why would Joshua need to give a command like this? Well, it's not because of any deficiency in God.

If you say to one of your kids, "Work hard to be loving toward your brother or sister." That makes perfect sense, because we all know that brothers and sisters can be really annoying sometimes. So it can be a real struggle to love them.

But God is perfect and amazing and awesome. Why would we have any trouble loving Him? It's not because of anything wrong with Him. It's because of some things that are very wrong with us. It's because we are so distracted and dense. We have such poor eyesight when it comes to spiritual things. We lose sight of God's greatness, and so we're not as in awe of Him as we should be. We don't love Him as we ought.

So this is a most needed exhortation, to be very careful to love the Lord your God. We need to work at this. We need to pray for God's help in pursuing Him, in loving Him. We should pray that we could see Him better that we might love Him more.

If you are a Christian, if you are repenting of your sin and clinging to Christ, then you can meditate on the amazing fact that you have a relationship with the Almighty God of the universe. How awesome is that! And you can study His Word, the Bible, to find out all kinds of stunning things about our God . . . the miracles He has performed for His people, the comforting words He has spoken, the promises He has made. As you take in those

wonderful things and as you talk to God in prayer, your love for God will grow.

Thinking of this relationship, we can compare it somewhat to the marriage relationship. If you're married, you can think about the vows you made on your wedding day "to love and to cherish" your spouse. Rob and Alex Myroniuk were recently married. Drake and Megan Pederson were recently married. We rejoice in these new marriages and the vows they have made to one another to love and to cherish one another for the rest of their lives.

For those of you who have been married very long you're also able to think of the times when it has been difficult to love and cherish your spouse. How do you cultivate a love for your spouse, over the decades? It might be easy to have really excited feelings about someone when you're dating, but what about the times in marriage when there's sickness and stress and financial problems and conflict?

How do you foster that love and be careful not to let it evaporate over the years? One way is to study your spouse. Focus your attention on the attractive qualities of your spouse. Spend time with your spouse. Communicate. Share words of gratefulness and appreciation. Where the analogy breaks down, of course, is knowing that your spouse is a sinner. He or she is not perfect. Still you can cultivate that love and work to nurture and grow that love between you and your spouse.

But how much more so with God? God is sinless and perfect. We will never need to forgive God. So it's a matter of focusing on all of His attributes, every one of His characteristics shining forth in unspeakable glory. We need to spend time with Him, communicating with Him in prayer and the Word. We must express to Him our thankfulness and praise. We can do that in the quietness of our own hearts as we drift off to sleep at night, as we wake up in the morning. We can do this in family prayer times. We can do this in the fellowship of the church as we have times of corporate prayer and as we sing together praises to our God. What a blessing these worship services are, to express these things to God together as a body of believers. This is a tremendous means of grace.

So in response to this command from the mouth of Joshua, recorded here in God's authoritative Word to us, please avail yourself of the many means of grace God has given in order to grow in us a deep love for Him. Don't ignore your Savior! Study Him. Spend time with Him. Communicate with Him. Thank Him and praise Him. Follow Him and obey Him. Talk to others about

Him. Hang out with other people who love Him, too. Be very careful to love the Lord your God. Cultivate that relationship you have with Him.

Remembrance

Another way to cultivate this love is through remembrance, something that has been a theme throughout the book of Joshua. In this chapter Joshua reminds the Israelites of God's faithfulness to them. In verse 3 he tells them, "you have seen all that the Lord your God has done to all these nations for your sake, for it is the Lord your God who has fought for you." Verses 9-10 are similar. Remembering is very powerful. And in a relationship remembering can reignite a deep sense of love and appreciation. It's good to remember.

Just last week Stacy and I enjoyed some time of reminiscing about the early days of our relationship when we were back in Midland, Michigan visiting her parents. That was the town where Stacy and I went to high school together and began dating our senior year. We met through some mutual friends, talked some at school and on the phone. And then we went out on our first date together after a football game one Friday night. We just wanted to get a bite to eat and hang out some. So I drove us in the little Nissan Sentra that I borrowed from my dad and we went to the Wendy's that was just down the street from the stadium. I remember it was pouring rain, the windshield wipers were going as fast as they could and still I was having some trouble seeing. And as I pulled into the Wendy's parking lot I hit the curb really hard. Stacy was gracious not to criticize my driving ability. And I didn't say anything either because I was so embarrassed. We went in, I ordered 4 hamburgers (because I was famished after playing in the football game), and Stacy ordered one chocolate chip cookie. I think she did most of the talking as I scarfed down my burgers and she delicately broke off small bites of cookie and ate them during pauses in the conversation. We talked and laughed and learned about one another.

Last week when we were in Midland we got to go on a date because Stacy's parents were willing to babysit the kids. I suggested we could go back to that Wendy's, but Stacy didn't feel like fast food. We did, though, walk around the high school and the football stadium and talked about those fun memories of how our relationship began.

Again, the analogy only goes so far. In our relationship with our Savior, there is a much more dramatic story. Because He comes and rescues us. He saves us. He pulls us out of our

enslavement to sin, gives us a new heart, makes us one of His children, promises us a great inheritance, and fights for our good. So when we think back through the history of our relationship with the Lord, which we should take the time to do often, that should fill us with thanksgiving and awe. And that ought to stir up deep love for our Savior. Remember what He has done for you, from the earliest days of your relationship with Him up to the present time.

Resisting Idolatrous Loves

For the last few minutes now let's think about the other side of this coin. We've been thinking about the positive, proactive pursuit of love for our Savior. If we think of that in terms of being on offense, that's our goal – a deepening love for God. But we also have to play defense, because there's always going to be things that will compete for our love. There will be temptations to love other things. So we need to be vigilant to resist idolatrous loves.

Joshua speaks to this a few times in this chapter. In verse 7 he warns against mixing with the nations remaining in the land or worshiping their gods. In verse 12, which I mentioned earlier, he warns against clinging to those nations or making marriages with them. Then down in verse 16 he warns again against worshiping other gods.

Now, just a word of clarification about verse 12, where he forbids intermarrying with the other nations. This is not really about race or ethnicity. This is about worship. I say that because Moses married a Cushite woman, meaning she was from Ethiopia. There was also Rahab who lived in Jericho, but her and her family became part of Israel.

What Joshua is warning against is intermarrying with people who don't worship the one true God. It turns out this did become a huge snare for the Israelites. And it continues to be a temptation for believers today—to marry or have close relationships with those who are not committed to the Lord.

The relationships we have on this earth, and especially the marriage relationship, are going to be major factors in directing our affections. If you're a believer and you're married to a believer, then the two of you can spur one another on in your love for the Lord. But if you're married to an unbeliever, or dating an unbeliever, that's going to pull you in the opposite direction.

Close friendships are similar. If you have a solid group of Christian friends, that can be a powerful means of grace in cultivating love for your Savior. But if you spend most of your free time hanging out with unbelievers, there's a strong likelihood that the things they love will become the things you love.

So choose your friends wisely. Choose a spouse wisely. Be very discerning about the things you allow to influence you. We need to be mindful of these things if we are to resist idolatrous loves.

I'll leave you with two lines from the Psalms, one for each side of this coin that we've been looking at. Playing offense, in our pursuit of greater love for God, we can pray with the Psalmist in Psalm 90:14.

“Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.” (Psalm 90:14, ESV)

Let us bask in the amazing love of God, His steadfast love for us. May we be satisfied in Him forever and ever.

And playing defense, as we journey through this fallen world, we can pray the prayer that is our fighter verse for this week, from Psalm 141. The last part of it says, “Do not let my heart incline to any evil . . .” That's a great prayer. We are so prone to wander. We need the Lord to hold fast to us, to keep us from straying into evil.

We should be grateful for these wise words from an elderly saint, the great Commander Joshua. His parting words to the nation of Israel are applicable to us today. Next Sunday we'll study his final speech in chapter 24.