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Joshua 23: 1-11

LOVE YOUR GOD

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In 1953, Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay became the first people to reach the summit of Mount Everest. Since then, climbing Everest has become something of cultural folklore around the world- kids dream of it, adults aspire to it. And the danger adds to the intrigue. We know Everest is incredibly dangerous, especially near the top – the lack of oxygen, exhaustion, turbulent weather. Yet one of the areas which mountaineers fear most on Everest isn't at the top, but at the bottom. The Khumbu glacier is a 17km long river of ice that sweeps down from Everest to lower regions. Going from base camp to camp 1 on the mountain means climbing up the glacier, through what's known as the Khumbu Icefall, a place full of deep crevasses, snow bridges and ice boulders the size of houses. And because the glacier is moving downhill at the whopping pace of 1m per day, the Khumbu icefall is highly unstable. Towers of ice can collapse at any moment. The ground beneath you can give way without warning. Climbers know that you get in and get out of the Icefall as quickly as you can. The slow drift of the glacier is deadly. You can't see it, you can't feel it, but the slow drift can kill you.

Joshua didn't need to know what a glacier was to know that a slow drift is deadly. He knew, as he faced the end of his time leading Israel, that drifting away from God was the greatest danger the people faced once he was gone. And it's the drift that he addresses in his final speech to the people.

So, let's set the context. Following the death of Achan, which we looked at last week, Israel went on to defeat Ai. Then came the famous battle where God made the sun stand still and gave victory to the Israelites. There were battles in the south, battles in the north. And after many, many years, condensed for us into just a few short chapters, God gave the land to Israel just as he'd promised. Joshua divided the land between the tribes of Israel, giving each their own territory to settle down in. And we're told that the land had rest from war (11:23).

Now it's worth pointing out that the original residents of the land have by no means be annihilated or completely pushed out. Most still lived alongside the Israelites. The Gibeonites were one group who made a treaty with Israel and went on to serve them. But in other places there was an uneasy co-existence between the Israelites and Canaanite tribes. The book of Judges tells us that as time went by, Israel didn't do what God commanded them, they didn't drive out the Canaanites. And so we see throughout Judges, Samuel and Kings that these tribes became a thorn in the side of Israel, just as God warned. But we're getting ahead of ourselves!

At the end of his life, once Israel have been allotted their territories and the land has rest from war, Joshua summoned all the leaders of Israel and gave a final address. It's such a stunning passage, such a deep and profound testimony to God's faithfulness and to human nature. It's sad we only have 20min to look at it. I'd really encourage all of us to keep coming back to Joshua's speech this week and allow God to speak to our hearts through it. But let's read Joshua 23 together now.

Now, Joshua is a very old man at this point – we see that in verses 1 and 2. He's not going to be around for much longer. His time of leading Israel is almost over. He's run the race – to use Paul's words - and he's run it faithfully. Joshua has been obedient in following the Lord and under his leadership, as chapter 24 points out, Israel too has been obedient to the Lord. But unlike when Moses passed away, Joshua doesn't pass the reigns over to a single successor, rather it's the elders, leaders, judges and officials who will continue to oversee the people. And as with any transition of leadership, there are many risks. Israel is in a very precarious position. In many ways, they are at a fork in the road, having to choose which way they will go. So what does Joshua say to those who will continue once he's gone?

The first thing he does is point to God's faithfulness; what God has done for Israel. Verse 3: *you yourselves has seen everything the Lord your God has done to all these nations, for your sake; it was the Lord who fought for you.*

After twenty plus years of marching into battle against different kings and different armies all throughout the land – after all the fear and adrenaline, blood, sweat and tears, the grieving over lost comrades and loved ones, of time away from families, time rehabilitating from injuries, after all of this Joshua does NOT say, “look at what you’ve achieved for yourselves”. No. Eight times throughout his speech, Joshua reminds Israel that it is GOD who has fought for them; God who has achieved victory for them. It is God who has given them this land. It is because of God that their enemies have not been able to withstand Israel. It is because God has fought for them that Israel has had the military success it has. God has fulfilled his promises to Israel. God has been faithful. And because he is faithful, Israel’s new leaders can be assured that God will continue to fight on their behalf. Look at verse 5: *the Lord your God himself will push them out for your sake. He will drive them out before you, and you will take possession of the land, as the Lord your God promised you.*

Joshua reminds Israel that the Lord has done great things for them; he tells them that God will continue to do great things for them. And it’s from this foundation of God’s faithfulness that Joshua points to how Israel should respond to him.

The right response, is to obey, love and hold fast to God. Verse 6: be very strong, Joshua says to Israel. Be very strong. Not so they can continue fighting the Canaanites. But so they can carefully obey God’s word, obey without wavering, without compromise. Be very strong so they do not chase after the gods of the Canaanites, but rather hold fast to the one true God. Be very careful to love God, the one who fights for them. Be careful to watch yourselves, Joshua says. Obey God, hold fast to God, love God, with great strength and great care.

Now, the order of what Joshua says here is so very important. Because if we neglect to notice the order of things, then what Joshua tells Israel here could start to feel a little legalistic. A little like duty. A little “you must love God”. Loving someone because it’s your duty, when in your heart you resent them, isn’t love, it’s insulting. Imagine a man giving his wife flowers out of duty. And obedience that doesn’t spring from love is just as ugly. It’s the basis of dictatorships. Our world has seen many a dictator. But our God is not one of them. The foundation of Israel’s response to God is not legalistic rule keeping. It’s not duty. It’s founded on what God has first done for them – and continues to do for them. God has saved them, he has made them a people, he has fought for them, he has given them rest, he has been faithful to them without fault. God acted first. He loved first. He’s kept his promises. He’s saved them, protected them, established them and walked with them every step of the way – none of which, mind you, they’ve deserved. It’s on this foundation that their response is based – God’s remarkable love for them. His self-giving love and goodness and kindness. The wonder of who he is and what he has done for them. He is the one – the only one – who loves them, saves them, fights for them. How could they not love him back? How could they not want to hold to him and obey him?

Well, because it’s human nature to turn away from God, isn’t it. The human heart is bent away from God and toward sin. And Joshua knew this. He knew **the very real temptations they would face in the land**, because the Israelites were surrounded by people who did not know the Lord nor fear him. People whose wickedness was the very reason they were to be driven out of the land in the first place. And in verse 7, Joshua warns them *do not associate with these nations that remain among you; do not invoke the makes of their gods or swear by them. You must not serve them or bow down to them.* Don’t ally yourselves with the Canaanite tribes. Don’t intermarry with them. Don’t associate with them. Why? Because as surely as a glacier drifts downhill, the Israelites would surely be tempted to drift away from the one true God. The heart is deceitful above all things. Sin crouches at the door. Our enemy prowls like a lion, looking to destroy God’s people. Be separate, says Joshua. Be holy, be set apart, be vigilant. Don’t even give yourself the opportunity to flirt with temptation by intermingling with the nations around you and their wicked

ways. Because temptation gives birth to sin, and when sin is fully grown, it gives birth to death. The slow drift kills. What our deceitful hearts chase after, what the father of lies tells us is good, will actually destroy us.

And this is where Joshua points last. The **consequence of sin will be devastating**. *If you turn away and ally yourselves with the survivors of these nations that remain among you and if you intermarry with them and associate with them, then you may be sure that the Lord your God will no longer drive out these nations before you. Instead, they will become snares and traps for you, whips on your backs and thorns in your eyes, until you perish from this good land, which the Lord your God has given you.* Turning from God will see the loss of his blessing. If the Israelites are not faithful to their God, he will no longer fight for them. He will no longer allow them to occupy the land he's so graciously given them. The nations they so longed to be like will become a source of constant pain and oppression and slavery. In turning from God, they will bring God's righteous anger upon themselves and they will perish.

Now that they are in the land, now that God has given them rest, Israel face a choice. Respond rightly to God, who has kept his promises to them, who has given them life and abundant blessings. Hold tight to him in love and obedience. Or turn their backs, drift into temptation and face the consequences.

We don't have to read very far forward to discover what choice they made. Time and time again. And it makes you wonder, as the generations passed by, if any of them came back to Joshua's words, if any of them heard this speech read out, and realised what Israel as a whole had done to itself, what they were doing to themselves, as they forsook the Lord their God and drift further and further into the ways of the nations around them.

Would any of them remember God's goodness and faithfulness to them? Would that touch their hearts and influence their response to him? Would any of them seek to obey him, cling to him, love him? Or would they all just be lulled into a stupor by the seductiveness of the devil's lies? Would they all just allow themselves to drift away from their God and into the snare of the culture around them, becoming saturated with it until they couldn't distinguish good from evil, truth from lie, until finally, having repeatedly violated the covenant and forsaken the one true God, they would bring his wrath upon themselves?

And I wonder how we, as God's people today, compare. I wonder what Joshua would say to us.

We have lived in the land of blessing, in the fulfilment of so many promises, for a long time. And I don't mean Australia, although here we experience some of the most abundant lifestyles and freedoms in the world.

Rather, we live this side of the cross. We are new covenant people, people purchased with the blood of Jesus Christ at unfathomable expense. Our God chose us, pursued us, sacrificed for us, endured our punishment for us, all while we were dead in our sin. Dead. Without the slightest urge or inkling to turn to him. Worthy of hell, each and every one of us. And yet, our God and Father chose us in Jesus before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love, he predestined us to be adopted as his children through Jesus, in accordance with his pleasure and will. In him, we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us. Because of his great love for us, our God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in our transgressions.

This is what our God has done for us. While we were absolutely opposed to him, while we were incapable of turning to him, incapable of helping ourselves, slaves to sin, slaves to evil, slaves to death, he saved us in love through his precious Son Jesus.

And what is the right response? I dare say it's very similar to what Joshua told the Israelites – knowing what God has done for us, be very strong, be very careful to love the Lord your God, to hold fast to him and obey his word without compromise.

Because the temptation for us is the same. We too are surrounded by a culture that stands in opposition to God. We too are surrounded by idolatry – although for us, perhaps it's a little harder to pick up on than shiny statues or shrines. And the slow drift is a reality for us too.

I wonder where along the line our purpose in life ceased being about making much of God and became about making much of ourselves.

I wonder where along the line our incomes stopped being about sharing with those in need and started being about accumulating for ourselves.

I wonder when entertainment; whether it be the radio, novels, newspapers, Netflix, Instagram, of the plethora of pastimes we can indulge in, surpassed our desire to study God's word, to really know it well.

I wonder when gathering together with fellow believers, putting in the hard yards of love, was replaced by the ease of hanging out with mates at the sports club or gym or pub.

I wonder when fighting for our rights became more important than loving our neighbour and loving our enemy, with the costly love that Jesus demonstrated.

I wonder when our personal comfort and fulfilment surpassed being faithful despite the cost. Suffering for the sake of our Saviour.

I wonder when we stopped desiring to live in service of our God, stopped aspiring to be elders, leaders, ministers, missionaries, gospel workers, and instead elevated roles of worldly prestige.

I wonder when it was that God's people in the west started bowing down to idols of self-fulfilment, individualism, status and comfort. And all the while, calling it good. Calling it God's blessing.

It's confronting to think of how we might have bought into the values of the culture around us. It's confronting to weigh up whether my behaviour, my thought processes, my aspirations are godly or idolatrous. It's confronting to think that God has set me aside – he's set us aside – to be his holy people, to love him, to live by his word, to share the good news of Jesus Christ, irrespective of what our culture values or what we ourselves might desire. It's confronting to think that my life is not about me, but about him, and about others.

And yet when we look back to the cross, at what God has done for us, and forward to eternity, at the glorious hope of being with him forever, how else could we possibly want to live, than entirely for him. When we think of God – of who he is and what he's done for us – his love, his grace, his mercy, when we turn to him and meditate on him and worship him, when we allow our hearts and minds to be transformed by his word – those idols we treasure are exposed for what they are, and pale in comparison. He is our God of glory. Of majesty, or power and honour and praise. We live for him. We hold tight to him. We dive deep into his word, saturate ourselves in it, and live it. And above all, we love him, with every fibre of our being.

Joshua's speech is for us today. It calls us to stop, to examine ourselves, to repent. To get back on that narrow way that leads to life. And to live lives of worship because of the goodness of our God.

Our God has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy.

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