

## No Middle Ground

### Joshua 23-24

"When I was a boy, my father, a baker, introduced me to the wonders of song," tenor Luciano Pavarotti relates. "He urged me to work very hard to develop my voice. Arrigo Pola, a professional tenor in my hometown of Modena, Italy, took me as a pupil. I also enrolled in a teachers college. On graduating, I asked my father, 'Shall I be a teacher or a singer?' "Luciano,' my father replied, 'if you try to sit on two chairs, you will fall between them. For life, you must choose one chair.' "I chose one. It took seven years of study and frustration before I made my first professional appearance. It took another seven to reach the Metropolitan Opera. And now I think whether it's laying bricks, writing a book--whatever we choose--we should give ourselves to it. Commitment, that's the key. Choose one chair."

The advice of Pavarotti's dad is very similar to the advice given by Joshua in his two farewell addresses to Israel. The difference of course is that the gravity of the commitment Israel is being called to make in Joshua 23-24 is much more significant than that of Pavarotti. Israel can't "sit between two chairs." The Israelites have to choose "one chair."

### **Joshua's first farewell address: Be faithful to God and you will be blessed in the Promised Land; be unfaithful and you will be removed (Joshua 23)**

As we have already noted, Joshua is a simple book to outline. The first five chapters deal with Israel entering the Promised Land. Chapters 6-12 describe Israel's conquest of the Promised Land. Chapters 13-22 deal with the distribution of the Promised Land. Chapters 23-24, which we will consider today, record for us Joshua's parting words to Israel. Joshua gives two different farewell addresses, one in chapter 23 and the other in chapter 24. You could say that these chapters provide the details of what is required of Israel if they are to retain the Promised Land.

In both of Joshua's farewell addresses, we observe a theme frequently repeated in the Old Testament—i.e. blessing for obedience and curses for disobedience. Though we don't have time this morning, reading Deuteronomy 28-30 will prove very helpful in understanding more fully what Joshua is saying in these chapters. God made a covenant with Israel at Mount Sinai and demonstrated complete faithfulness in keeping His covenant. God's faithfulness obligates Israel to respond in faithfulness to Him. If they obey and serve God, they will receive His blessings. If they are unfaithful to God and refuse to obey and serve Him, they will receive curses in place of blessings.

In Joshua 23, we observe three rounds of Joshua reminding the leaders about what the LORD has done on Israel's behalf followed by both exhortations for them to respond faithfully and warnings if they fail to do so.

### **God's actions:**

**He fought for Israel (v. 3)**

**He enabled Israel to drive out great and powerful nations (vss. 9-10)**

**He fulfilled every single one of His good promises (v. 14)**

### **Israel's responsibilities in response:**

**Be firm in keeping and doing all that God's law requires (v. 6)**

The possession of the land and retaining possession is conditioned upon Israel's covenant obedience. Joshua calls Israel to do the very thing God called him to do earlier in the book—"Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go" (Joshua 1:7). Careful attention to and obedience to the law is what led to Joshua's success and the same is no less essential for Israel's success.

**Don't associate with the Canaanites (v. 7a)**

Any fraternization with the enemy would only work to bring Israel down. These pagans have long rejected God in pursuit of their idols and will only influence Israel to do the same. Therefore, God forbids any associations.

**Don't serve or bow down to other gods (v. 7b)**

Imagine the folly of worshipping the gods of the defeated enemy. Consider how high handed of sin it would be to worship other gods in view of God's faithfulness to Israel. God very clearly warns Israel not to go there.

**Hold fast to God (v. 8)**

The word translated "hold fast" in verse 8 is also used in Genesis 2:24 with reference to the commitment of a husband and wife to "cleave to" one another in a permanent marriage bond. The idea is that Israel is to remain "permanently glued" to God, fully and irrevocably committed to Him. Israel is in a sense "married" to the LORD and is expected to be a faithful "spouse," clinging only to Him.

**Be careful to love God (v. 11)**

The Israelite's exclusive love was due to the LORD based on their covenant relationship with Him and in response to all He had faithfully done for them.

## **God's warnings:**

**If :**

**Israel forms political and marriage alliances with the pagans living in the land (v. 12)**

**Israel violates the covenant of God by serving and bowing down to other gods (v. 16a)**

**Then:**

**Israel will no longer be able to drive these nations out (v. 13a)**

**The LORD'S anger will burn against Israel and the nation will perish from the good land God has given them (vss. 13b, 16b)**

What God threatens for unfaithfulness is as sure to come true as His good promises for Israel when they are faithful.

There is no opportunity here for being neutral or riding the fence. There is no middle ground. Either Israel will obey, hold fast to, and love the LORD, or they will turn away from Him to ally themselves with the pagans around them and to serve their gods. The consequences of Israel's choice are clear: The blessing of complete occupation of the Promised Land for holding fast to God OR Losing it all by turning to the Canaanites.

## **Joshua's second farewell address-Commit to fearing and serving God with all faithfulness in response to His faithfulness (Joshua 24)**

Joshua's farewell challenge in chapter 24 essentially amounts to a challenge for them to renew their covenant with God. He challenges them to commit themselves to fearing and serving God with all faithfulness in response to His faithfulness.

The place at which Israel assembles for this final address is significant. Shechem is where Joshua and the people of Israel had earlier gathered to worship the LORD and review the law of God (Joshua 8:30-35). It was at Shechem that God promised Abraham that his descendants would inherit the land (See Genesis 12:6-7).

The opening 13 verses of Joshua 24 provide:

### **Joshua's rehearsal of God's faithfulness to Israel (24:1-13)**

### **God brought Israel out of Ur of the Chaldees**

Israel's forefather, Abraham, and his family once lived beyond the River Euphrates as idolaters who worshiped false gods. God called Abraham to leave this land and go to Canaan where God blessed him with many descendants.

### **God brought Israel out of Egypt**

The Egyptians enslaved the Jews and made their lives bitter. God sent Moses and Aaron to lead Israel out of Egyptian bondage. He sent 10 plagues against the Egyptians as the means for causing the stubborn Pharaoh to let His people go. These plagues demonstrated the impotency of the false gods of Egypt. While Pharaoh let Israel go after the tenth plague, he changed his mind and sent his army after them with chariots and horsemen. The LORD kept Israel from being overtaken by putting a shield of darkness between Israel and the Egyptians. He also brought Israel across the Red Sea on dry ground while allowing the waters to cover and drown the pursuing Egyptian army.

### **God guided Israel in the wilderness**

He brought Israel out of Egypt intent on bringing them into the Promised Land. This plan had to be delayed because of Israel's sin of unbelief at Kadesh Barnea. This sin caused Israel to wander in the wilderness for a long time until the old unbelieving generation had died off. Even in the wilderness, God demonstrated His faithfulness toward Israel. When the Amorites fought against Israel, God gave them over into their hands. When Balaam was sent by Balak to curse Israel, God turned his curse into a blessing.

### **God gave Israel the Promised Land**

The inhabitants of the Promised Land fought against Israel, but God gave them into their hands. God sent a hornet ahead of them. There is a lot of difference of opinion as to what is meant by this hornet. The view that makes the most sense to me is that the hornet represents the paralyzing fear that God brought upon the inhabitants of Canaan when they received word of His powerful acts on behalf of Israel. God promised to bring this reaction and He delivered on His promise.

Israel's conquest of the land didn't depend on their own sword or bow. Rather, God gave Israel the land. He gave them a land on which they did not toil and cities they did not build and vineyards and olive groves they did not plant.

### **Joshua's call for Israel to commit themselves to fear and serve God (24:14-15)**

Joshua calls Israel to the proper attitude. They are to have an attitude of fear or reverence towards God. Joshua also calls Israel to the proper action. They are to serve God. They are to serve Him with all faithfulness—their loyalty should belong to Him alone.

Joshua's choice has already been made, "As for me and my household, we will serve the LORD." Israel is presented with the choice that they have to make for themselves between the gods of their forefathers, the gods of the Amorites, or the LORD. When Joshua says that if serving the LORD seems undesirable, then chose which gods you will serve, he isn't doing anything to encourage that rebellious direction or to indicate that such a decision is acceptable. Rather, he is communicating that a choice has to be made. Israel can't serve both false gods and the LORD. He is communicating that no room is left for neutrality or riding the fence. There is no middle ground here. A person will end up choosing one or the other—the false gods or the one and only true God.

### **Israel's response: We will serve the LORD (24:16-18)**

The people are confident of their commitment to the LORD, "Far be it from us to forsake the LORD to serve other gods." They assure Joshua that they too want to serve the LORD along with him and give their reasons for doing so. They recognize God's work in delivering them out of Egypt, in performing great signs, in protecting them in their journeys, and in driving out the nations from the Promised Land. They affirm that they, like Joshua, will serve the LORD, because He is their God.

### **Joshua's Reaction: He gives two very negative replies (24:19-22)**

#### **You can't do it**

Joshua's reaction appears confusing at first. Israel has affirmed that they will serve the LORD. Why isn't he excited? Why does he say, "You are not able to serve the LORD?"

I believe that Joshua senses that Israel has made a rash commitment without carefully considering the seriousness of the solemn promise they have just made or the severe consequences for not keeping it. I think Joshua also senses a problem of overconfidence.

The reply of the people began with the words, "Far be it from us to forsake the LORD to serve other gods!" This is a demonstration of overconfidence for sure. How can we tell? In Deuteronomy 31:14-21, God predicted that Israel would forsake Him and turn to other gods. God knew Israel was disposed towards this direction. God gave Moses a song He later taught to Israel which anticipated their failure. Instead of responding, "We can do it and far be it from us not to," they should have responded, "God help us to make and keep such a commitment to Him."

Israel doesn't realize how high God's standard really is or what their commitment to Him will require of them. They don't grasp the weakness of the flesh to actually live by the commitment they have expressed to serve Him. Unless God places His Spirit in them and writes it on their hearts they'll never be able to do as they have said they will do.

Recognizing Israel's overconfidence, Joshua responds in such a way as to cause them pause. He pulls them up short a little bit to warn them not to take this decision lightly in view of God's high standard and the level of commitment He requires.

Joshua shares two things about God to impress upon Israel the weightiness of this moment. God is a holy God. There is no one holy like the LORD. He is one of a kind in His holiness. As Robert Hubbard writes, "This poses a problem for humans since, when they approach Him, His holiness explosively collides with their sinfulness. In other words, Yahweh is not as easy to get along with as Israel's quick, sincere reply might suggest."

God is also a jealous God. He is completely intolerant any deviation from exclusive devotion to Him. Just as a husband and wife jealously guard their mate's affection, so God guards the devotion of Israel—He won't tolerate their being divided in their loyalty to Him.

Impressing upon Israel even further the solemn nature of their commitment, Joshua warns, "He will not forgive your rebellion and your sins. If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, he will turn and bring disaster on you and make an end of you, after he has been good to you." For Israel to break their word, forsake God, and turn to false gods at this point in her history would be a demonstration of high handed, intentional sin for which disaster would be the certain consequence.

This is not the first time God warned of the sure consequence that would come upon those who were guilty of the high handed sin of forsaking God in pursuit of other gods:

Deuteronomy 29:16-21- "You yourselves know how we lived in Egypt and how we passed through the countries on the way here. You saw among them their detestable images and idols of wood and stone, of silver and gold. Make sure there is no man or woman, clan or tribe among you today whose heart turns away from the LORD our God to go and worship the gods of those nations; make sure there is no root among you that produces such bitter poison. When such a person hears the words of this oath, he invokes a blessing on himself and therefore thinks, "I will be safe, even though I persist in going my own way." This will bring disaster on the watered land as well as the dry. The LORD will never be willing to forgive him; his wrath and zeal will burn against that man. All the curses written in this book will fall upon him, and the LORD will blot out his name from under heaven. The LORD will single him out from all the tribes of Israel for disaster, according to all the curses of the covenant written in this Book of the Law."

The people of Israel respond to Joshua at this point, "No! We will serve the LORD." Again, Joshua gives a negative reply.

### **You are witnesses against yourselves**

They are witnesses against themselves that they have chosen to serve the LORD. They are not witnesses against themselves of a choice to reject the LORD. Rather, they are witnesses against themselves that they have made a commitment to the LORD. In what sense would this be a witness against them?

Again, Joshua's response is intended to impress upon them the seriousness of the commitment they are making in view of God's standard and the level of commitment He requires.

**Joshua's response establishes that commitment to God is a serious matter!**

Israel once again reaffirms their commitment, "Yes, we are witnesses."

**Joshua challenges the people to live according to their commitment (24:23-24)**

**Negatively: Get rid of the old—throw away the foreign gods**

**Positively: Give yourself to the LORD—yield your hearts to Him**

Israel once again responds affirmatively- "We will serve the LORD our God and obey Him." Joshua proceeds to make a covenant for the people. He writes down their agreement in the Book of the Law of God. He inscribes the statutes of the covenant on a large stone slab which is set up beneath the oak at this sacred location. Joshua declares that this stone serves as a witness against the Israelites if they are untrue to God.

The conclusion of Joshua indicates that Joshua was true to his commitment to the serve the LORD, "Israel served the LORD throughout the lifetime of Joshua and of the elders who outlived him and who had experienced everything the LORD had done for Israel."

How about us? How are we doing?

**God is calling us to make a commitment**

For Israel, they had a clear choice. They had to decide which God they would serve—one of the pagan gods in their neighborhood? OR Yahweh, the God of Israel. They couldn't vacillate. They couldn't ride the fence. They couldn't worship the LORD and keep the false gods around too. They had to choose to worship Yahweh alone or to worship other gods. There was no middle ground. The choice Israel had probably won't be our issue. Few of us have to choose from a list of gods in our neighborhood.

While our choice is different, the commitment called of us is similar.

The LORD requires of us that we give Him our exclusive devotion.

We are called to the following commitments:

Mark 8:34- "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."

Mark 12:30- "Love the Lord your God with all of your heart and with all of your soul and with all of your mind and with all of your strength."

Romans 12:1- “Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship.”

As was the case with Israel, we can’t ride the fence. We can’t vacillate between God and another master.

Matthew 6:24- “No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.”

Who or what are we going to live for? Who or what will we serve? Where is our loyalty?

To God or to a career.

To God or to doing whatever we can to gain popularity or power?

To God or to money and things?

To God or to pleasure?

To God or the pursuit of safety and security?

To God or to family?

Will we serve the same things our culture without God serves or will we serve God?

Will we serve ourselves and our own interests or will we serve God?

Are we willing to make a total commitment of all we are and all we have—of our whole life to God? Remember, only a total commitment will do. God does not tolerate rival suitors.

I’d like to challenge you to make a commitment this morning.

On the sermon outlines in the bulletin, I have written, ‘As for me and my household, we will serve’ and have left a blank for you to fill in. Joshua called for Israel to make a commitment. The apostle Paul called for believers to make a commitment. Jesus called for believers to make a commitment. It seems right based on what we have considered this morning that even though we live in a commitment avoiding society in which the word is regarded as a four letter word, to call for a commitment here and now. You will make a decision as to who or what you will serve. You can’t stay neutral. Something is in the blank whether you write in there or not. I would challenge you to put “the LORD” in that blank and to trust Him to live by your commitment. If not this morning, ask God to help you do so soon.

In a moment, we are going to provide the opportunity for us to sing together the song “I have decided to follow Jesus.” Decide whom you will serve. If you have made the decision to follow the LORD, please sing with us, if not, please don’t sing. If you have not yet made this commitment, do pray about and ask God to help you make it and keep it, but don’t be a testimony against yourself by singing something you don’t mean. I don’t care if everybody else in the room is singing, unless you’re willing to commit to following the LORD, please remain silent as we sing. I don’t care if nobody else in the room is singing, if this it is your commitment this morning to serve the LORD, I want you to join me in singing. As we sing, please don’t look around. Look within and express your heart’s commitment in song or in silence. I hope you will join me in song. Choose for yourselves today whom you will serve. As for me and my family, we will serve the LORD!