

Not
one
Failed
Promise.

Life Group Study Series

Joshua: Week Thirteen

30th April 2017

Bible

Joshua 24:1-28 (NIV)

The Covenant Renewed at Shechem

1 Then Joshua assembled all the tribes of Israel at Shechem. He summoned the elders, leaders, judges and officials of Israel, and they presented themselves before God.

2 Joshua said to all the people, “This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: ‘Long ago your ancestors, including Terah the father of Abraham and Nahor, lived beyond the Euphrates River and worshiped other gods. **3** But I took your father Abraham from the land beyond the Euphrates and led him throughout Canaan and gave him many descendants. I gave him Isaac, **4** and to Isaac I gave Jacob and Esau. I assigned the hill country of Seir to Esau, but Jacob and his family went down to Egypt.

5 “Then I sent Moses and Aaron, and I afflicted the Egyptians by what I did there, and I brought you out. **6** When I brought your people out of Egypt, you came to the sea, and the Egyptians pursued them with

chariots and horsemen as far as the Red Sea. **7** But they cried to the Lord for help, and he put darkness between you and the Egyptians; he brought the sea over them and covered them. You saw with your own eyes what I did to the Egyptians. Then you lived in the wilderness for a long time.

8 “I brought you to the land of the Amorites who lived east of the Jordan. They fought against you, but I gave them into your hands. I destroyed them from before you, and you took possession of their land. **9** When Balak son of Zippor, the king of Moab, prepared to fight against Israel, he sent for Balaam son of Beor to put a curse on you. **10** But I would not listen to Balaam, so he blessed you again and again, and I delivered you out of his hand.

11 “Then you crossed the Jordan and came to Jericho. The citizens of Jericho fought against you, as did also the Amorites, Perizzites, Canaanites, Hittites, Girgashites, Hivites and Jebusites, but I gave them into your hands. **12** I sent the

hornet ahead of you, which drove them out before you—also the two Amorite kings. You did not do it with your own sword and bow. **13** So I gave you a land on which you did not toil and cities you did not build; and you live in them and eat from vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant.’

14 “Now fear the Lord and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your ancestors worshiped beyond the Euphrates River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. **15** But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.”

16 Then the people answered, “Far be it from us to forsake the Lord to serve other gods! **17** It was the Lord our God himself who brought us and our parents up out of Egypt, from that land of slavery, and performed those great signs before our eyes. He protected us on our entire journey and among all the nations through which we traveled. **18** And the Lord drove out before us all the nations, including the Amorites, who lived in the land. We too will serve the Lord, because he is our God.”

19 Joshua said to the people, “You are not able to serve the Lord. He is a holy God;

he is a jealous God. He will not forgive your rebellion and your sins. **20** 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.”

21 But the people said to Joshua, “No! We will serve the Lord.”

22 Then Joshua said, “You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen to serve the Lord.”

“Yes, we are witnesses,” they replied.

23 “Now then,” said Joshua, “throw away the foreign gods that are among you and yield your hearts to the Lord, the God of Israel.”

24 And the people said to Joshua, “We will serve the Lord our God and obey him.”

25 On that day Joshua made a covenant for the people, and there at Shechem he reaffirmed for them decrees and laws.

26 And Joshua recorded these things in the Book of the Law of God. Then he took a large stone and set it up there under the oak near the holy place of the Lord.

27 “See!” he said to all the people. “This stone will be a witness against us. It has heard all the words the Lord has said to us. It will be a witness against you if you are untrue to your God.”

28 Then Joshua dismissed the people, each to their own inheritance.

Sermon Summary

This final chapter of Joshua ties up a few more loose ends and invites the Israelites to greater faithfulness. The loose ends in this case include a seemingly random one that goes all the way back to Genesis 50:24-25 where Joseph made his brothers promise to bring his bones back to Canaan from Egypt. In Exodus 13:19 we’re told that Moses brought Joseph’s remains with them and now, in Joshua 24 we’re told that the Israelites buried Joseph’s bones at Shechem. This interest in the patriarchal story plays out in a couple of other ways in this chapter. To begin with, Shechem was very important to the people of Israel. It was the first place that Abraham had stayed in the land (Genesis 12:6) and was the site of the only land (the burial plot where Joseph was buried) that the patriarchs possessed until the conquest. In Deuteronomy 27:12-13 Moses commands

Israel to read the blessings and curses at Shechem when they enter the land (which they did in Joshua 8:30-35). However, the more interesting connection with the patriarchs is found in the Lord's speech that opens the chapter. Joshua here acts as a prophet, speaking the words of God to the people and it is very interesting history of the people of Israel.

The twin themes of protection and provision place the focus purely on the activity of God and invite a response which Joshua turns to verse 14. It is, however, very interesting to note that this history doesn't contain; namely any reflection on Israel's failures. Verse 7b (the second half of verse 7) is incredibly interesting – it is the most compressed retelling of Exodus 16 to Numbers 21 that you'll ever find! The focus, even here, is squarely on God.

So, how should Israel respond? Should they give thanks to the Lord and worship him? Should they declare his goodness to the nations and bear witness to what the Lord had done? These are certainly appropriate but Joshua calls the people to a more foundational commitment – “Now fear the Lord and serve him with all faithfulness.” Without faithful service, worship and praise are only empty religious ceremony. Without faithful service, witness to God's goodness only exposes our hypocrisy. This is a fundamental commitment that Joshua calls them to.

Immediately following this, however, we have a very surprising command - “Throw away the gods your ancestors worshiped beyond the Euphrates River and in Egypt.” It seems that, even after all this time, the people still had their ancestral gods. The Lord's speech also makes reference to them in verse 2 (and for a strange confirmation of this read Genesis 35:1-5). The people hold, in their own tents, the means for their downfall; there is no talk of the nations around them now. In the most famous verses from this text Joshua challenges them to choose who they will serve to which the people respond, “We too will serve the Lord, because he is our God.”

What follows is a strange back-and-forth dialogue between Joshua and the people. In response to their affirmation to serve the Lord he states that they are unable to serve the Lord, warning them that if they are unfaithful the Lord will destroy them. The people say a second time, “We will serve the Lord.” Joshua then urges them a second time to be rid of their other gods to which the people respond, a third time, “We will serve the Lord our God and obey him.” What's missing, however, is any action in getting rid of their gods. The Israelites are all talk, but no action.

This call to commitment – in word and deed – is the final word in the book of Joshua (which, incidentally, opened the same way) and invites us to do more that reflect on the failure of the people of Israel. It invites us to consider our commitment to the Lord. And it invites us to go one better than Israel and actually repent of our unfaithfulness so that our recommitment is unhindered by those things that trip us up!

Who will you serve? And if it is the Lord, will you rid yourself of those things that hinder you? Ultimately, this is what the book of Joshua is about; the Lord's faithfulness which invites a response of faithfulness to Him. We have not read the book properly unless we too seek to answer this question.

Questions

These questions are a guide for conversation. Please take your time over them, and don't feel in a rush to finish them. The objective of a LifeGroup discussion is to engage in meaningful conversation around a Biblical idea, invite the Holy Spirit to lead your time of reflection.

You might want to have a go at question 1 before reading the passage.

1. Opening Discussion: Take some time to share the things you have learned from this series that will shape you into the future, and what have you learnt that is already impacting the way that you live? (Take some time to consider the past 13 weeks, you may want to look over the previous weeks notes as a reminder.)
2. Take some time to read Joshua chapter 24:1-28. As you read, or hear it read, notice if there are words or phrases that 'jump out at you'. What are they? (Try to resist the urge to explain why it jumped out – this is about observing, not judging, allowing God to show you something). Invite the Holy Spirit to lead you to that word or phrase. Take some time to share what you've been lead to.
3. What are the implications of foreign gods among the people of Israel? How does their presence affect how we read their struggles in Exodus-Numbers to be faithful?
4. Without faithful service, worship becomes empty ceremony and witness is emptied of its power. How else is faithful service the fundamental response to the Lord?
5. Whilst words can often be hollow, declarations of intent are still important. What is the connection between our words and our actions in these sorts of aspirational moments.
6. What are the characteristics of true repentance before God? And if you feel comfortable sharing with the group, what might God be asking you to repent of?

(If you are uncomfortable sharing this with your group, you may want to write your answer to this question down, to share with another you trust, or to bring before God in the quiet of your heart. But may we encourage you where possible to be honest with your group. Vulnerability in a safe space, builds trust, depth and prepares us for the work of the Holy Spirit to shape our walk with Jesus.)

7. What are the characteristics of true commitment to God?

Prayer

Take some time to reflect on your answers to question 6 and 7, pray for each other that you might be reminded of the power of repentance, as well as the forgiveness Jesus brings. And, continue to pray for God's strength to remain faithful in our service of Him.