
WISE WORDS FROM A WISE MAN

STUDY NOTES FOR CARE GROUPS – JOSHUA 23

August 2, 2009

The central focus for our study is the challenge of Leadership Transition; will we remember God when we move into a new chapter in our lives?

Context:

The time had come for Joshua to offer his farewell speech. Considerable time had elapsed since Yahweh had given rest to Israel and Joshua was now an old man (v. 1). So he issued a final address to the leaders of Israel (ch. 23), and then a final address to the entire nation (ch. 24).

Revisit key themes that Yahweh has impressed on Israel throughout the conquest and distribution of the land.

Concerning the Past – Yahweh fights for His people (vv. 1-11)

In verses 3 and 10, the Israelite leaders are reminded that Yahweh fights for His people. As a warrior, Yahweh 'drives out' the enemy despite the enemy's strength (vv. 9, 13). Thus, one Israelite warrior can send a thousand enemy warriors on the run (v. 10). Therefore, the leaders are respond in faithfulness to Yahweh, to "be very strong" and to "be careful to obey all that is written in the Scroll of the Torah of Moses, not turning either to the right or to the left" (v. 6, closely echoing much of the phraseology of Joshua 1:7).

Avoid any form of idolatry or apostasy (v. 6-7). For e.g., do not associate with the pagans; do not call upon the names of their gods; do not serve them nor bow down to them; rather, they are to hold fast to Yahweh "as you have done until now" (v. 7). Loyalty to Yahweh necessarily precludes any worship of, or service to, any false gods.

"*Love Yahweh your God*" (v. 11). The verb "to love" includes the gamut of human expression: sexual love, fervent friendship, and religious devotion – the Israelite are to exercise an exclusive loyalty – no divided loyalties, no half-hearted devotion. Yahweh's claim to the absolute allegiance of the Israelites is a claim that is totally unique in Israel's situation in Canaan, where everyone worshipped many gods. For Israel, Yahweh claimed to fulfill all the functions for which other nations needed a multitude of gods.

Concerning the Future – God keeps His Word (vv. 12-16)

Not one of Yahweh's good promises has yet failed; all have come true (v. 14). Conversely, this only assures the original audience (and yes, the present reader as well), that Yahweh's threats of destruction are likewise entirely dependable (v. 15). The fact that Yahweh keeps His promises cuts both ways. In addition to His promise to bless His people (vv. 5, 10, 14), Yahweh also promises to bring judgment on His people for the disobedience (vv. 15-16). The Israelites will perish quickly and face destruction if they violate the covenant that Yahweh has made with them. Although Yahweh is a God of love, His character prompts Him to respond in anger against sin (v. 16; see Exodus 34:5-7). Yahweh's anger is not an "out-of-control" temper, but a measured outrage against evil.

Reflection:

Joshua's speech reminds us that "rest is not the final word for life in the land...blessing can last as long as total faithfulness to Yahweh lasts." God proved His power to conquer long ago; it is Israel who must remain faithful. Has she learned the lesson from Israel's history?

Discussion:

The central idea in Joshua's speech is that when you hold fast to Yahweh, He fights for you; when you hold fast to the gods of your culture, Yahweh fights against you.

1. In our modern and affluent society, what are some gods whereby we can idolize and invoke God's wrath?

2. Does God's "carrot and stick" approach serve its intended purpose?

Application:

Let each of us renew our pledge of covenantal faithfulness to God; praying for forgiveness and a renewed resolve to walk faithfully with God.

Prayer:

Lord God, help me to hold fast to You. Help me to be faithful to show You my love and my obedience. Amen.