

Continuing Faithfulness to the Faithful God

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[0:00] Thanks very much, Ross. And do keep your Bibles open there at Joshua 23 as we look through that chapter. As Ross said, we're just having a kind of a one-off this morning and perhaps not such a well-known part of the Bible, but I trust that as this is the Word of God, it is something that will be really helpful and timely and also, I think, challenging for us this morning.

So let's have a look at that together. Statistically speaking, whether in the huge mountain ranges of Nepal or whether in the much smaller hills closer to home, there are far more accidents as people are descending from a mountain peak having reached the summit than there are on the way up.

There's various different reasons for that. But at least one recognized factor is that of complacency. That idea, you know, we've made it, we've succeeded, we've done the hard work, now we're just on the home stretch.

And it's as people lose their focus, as people switch off, that suddenly things can go very badly, very quickly. And in this passage that we're looking at this morning, Joshua is warning God's people about a similar kind of danger.

Just to get our bearings in the book, a really quick overview, the book of Joshua is all about God's faithfulness in giving his people the promised land.

[1:33] And by this stage, almost at the very end of the book, they are in the land, they are home, as it were. And the final three chapters of the book of Joshua are addressing God's people and how they're to live as inhabitants of the land.

The joys of that, but also, as we'll see, the warnings that come with that. And Joshua is telling the people, look, just because the conquest is complete, just because you're now in the land, just because you have rest, as it says there in verse 1, he says, don't get complacent, do not switch off, don't lose your focus on the God who brought you to this point.

As tragic things can happen, rather keep that same wholehearted commitment to God who brought you here. So for us as a church this morning, for those of us who are Christians, and perhaps some here who have been Christians for a long time, again, this passage is here to give us that same really important alert to make sure that we remain focused on God, to make sure that however long our Christian walk has been, that our priorities do not slip, but rather that we continue to cling to him to enjoy the blessings he alone can offer.

And for those here who aren't Christians, again, as Ross said, we're delighted to have you with us. Here's a great passage then for you guys to see what God has done, what God is like, and really the importance, the seriousness of an ongoing right response to him.

So let's have a look. We're going to see first God's ongoing faithfulness to his word. That is the foundation of this passage. That's really the foundation of the whole of the book of Joshua, what it's all about.

- [3 : 33] And then following on from that, we're shown two possible and contrasting responses of God's people and the consequences of those. But the first thing we're shown here, that Joshua speaks to the people that they need to know and remember as they live in the land is this, God's ongoing faithfulness to his word.
- God's ongoing faithfulness to his word. I do have a look at verses three down to five. It says this, And 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.
- Behold, I have allotted to you as an inheritance for your tribes, those nations that remain, along with all the nations that I have already cut off, from the Jordan to the great sea in the west.
- The Lord your God will push them back before you and drive them out of your sight, and you shall possess their land just as the Lord your God promised you.
- Joshua begins giving this incredible message pointing to God's faithfulness past and future. You have seen all that God has done, he says.
- [4 : 48] Joshua reminds the people, he's underlining that message. It's not that you've got yourself to this point. It's God who has been at work every step of the way.
- It is the Lord, Yahweh, the covenant-keeping God who has done exactly what he has promised he would do in bringing these people into the land that they can enjoy the rest they have.
- And Joshua also makes clear that God will continue to do that. There's a kind of now and not yet to the people's situation, isn't there? As we read those verses, they're in the land, they have possession of it, they have rest, and yet it's still very clear that there is work to be done, there is land to be claimed.
- And in those verses, we see that God's past faithfulness is held up as the evidence that he will continue to fully give them the land as he has promised.
- The people need to remember what God has done, and so keep their confidence in what he will do. God's ongoing faithfulness to his word is the foundation for their ongoing life in the land.
- [6 : 00] And in just the same way, the very same God's ongoing faithfulness to his word is for us the foundation of the Christian life.
- Christianity is not in the same way as the Old Testament about a physical land or an earthly place, it's not geographical in that way, but just like God's Old Testament people, in the Bible, we have seen God's perfect faithfulness to his word, to what he has said he will do.
- We have seen that to the fullest extent in the gospel, that the God who promises that he himself will come to rescue his sheep has come as the good shepherd, Jesus Christ, to bring his people home to him, that while we were still far from God, not doing anything to deserve it or earn it, Christ came and suffered and died on the cross that we might be brought home to God.
- We have seen that God is faithful to his word. Just as God fought for his people and brought them into the land in the Old Testament in Joshua as we've read, so through Jesus, God has fought for us and brought us into relationship with him.
- Jesus has defeated the enemies of sin and death. Jesus has brought us rest. And again, it's in knowing what he has done that he has won that victory that we know he will continue to hold on to us, continue to protect and grow us as his people.
- [7 : 42] The Apostle Paul in the New Testament writes these great words to the church in Rome, really getting at the same thing. If God is for us, who can be against us? And here's the key.

He who did not spare his own son but gave him up for us. If God has done that to keep his promise, if that is what has happened in the past, Paul continues, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?

God's faithfulness in the past is the grounds for that confidence in his ongoing faithfulness into the future, giving us all that we need for a relationship with him.

I don't know if you've got those people in your group of friends or in your family who have that sort of reputation as the flaky people. They're the people where you always get the message at the last minute saying they're not going to make it or there's always a change of plans.

You're never quite sure if things will follow through. All of us are like that to some degree, aren't we? We let people down. But isn't it great when we have those people who we just know we can rely on and that when they have said something it is as good as done.

[8:55] This passage is that great encouragement that God is like that friend are only infinitely better. God gives us what we desire in our relationships with others.

God is constant and consistent. God is unchanging and faithful. having brought us to himself through Jesus in the gospel he will keep us.

He will continue to grant us that forgiveness that we need. God will stick by us every step of the way. And as we think about that each one of us as individuals it's great that we can also have that same confidence collectively as a church.

We look back with great gratitude and perhaps we're not always as good at doing this as we should but it is good to look back with real gratitude to all that God has done in bringing us to this point in our life as a church.

We recognize it's not our skill or ability or anything that we've done that has got us here. It is God at work. And so this morning because of what God has done what we have seen we can always also look forward knowing that God will continue to be faithful.

[10:10] God will continue to do his work in building his church for his glory as we remain faithful to him. God has promised that he will build his church on the solid foundation the rock of the gospel and we can look back and know for certain God's ongoing faithfulness to his word and because of that know for certain he will continue to build his church through the work of Jesus.

And so that's the beginning then of Joshua's message who God is what God has done what God will continue to do a message to give us real confidence I think this morning but Joshua now kind of turns the camera from God to God's people in instructing them how to respond to God and all that he's done in bringing them into the promised land and Joshua gives two possible alternatives really a kind of a positive call to action and then a stark warning against the alternative he gives us he gives us a sort of be like this but then he's also going to go on and give us the alternative not like that and so the first part here what Joshua urges of his people be like this is a call to obedience and love enjoying God's blessing a call to obedience and love enjoying God's blessing Joshua as we said turns the spotlight onto the people verse 6 saying therefore in light of who God is in light of what God's done therefore be very strong to keep and to do all that is written in the book of the law of Moses turning aside from it neither to the right hand nor to the left the right response to this faithful God who has promised all this and done all this is Joshua tells the people obedience to his word now and just in case we might think that's a kind of obedience purely out of duty or a kind of tit for tat response well God's done this so I suppose we better do that

Joshua shows us it's far bigger it's far more holistic than that verse 8 speaks there of the ongoing need to cling to the law that picture of dependence and closeness verse 11 again given in light of how God has done all that he's promised Joshua then says be very careful therefore to love the Lord your God the response to God's faithfulness is never a begrudging compliance as if we're somehow now just in his debt and we just have to do what he says but rather it is a loving obedience because of what he has done it is a life lived delighting to depend on and to follow this faithful God one of the things that I love about Joshua's call here his instruction to the people his instruction to us this morning as well is that it holds together two things which if we're not careful we can so frequently pull apart so this is an obedience that comes from love it is an obedience as we've said that comes from living out a relationship with God and yet it is still an obedience and a love that requires effort so listen to the kind of active words that Joshua chooses verse 6 therefore be strong to keep and do all that is written verse 8 you shall cling to the

Lord your God verse 11 be careful therefore to love there is a responsibility there is this active engagement from God's people in the process not just an assumption that they will drift into obedience and love so think of the elite sports player or the concert musician no doubt they have a great love for their sport or for their instrument but they also need a diligence to get to that level and maintain that level to continue or think of a marriage hopefully there is genuine love there between husband and wife we celebrated that yesterday with Sean and Alice but there is also the effort that needs to go in that love grows as that relationship is invested in in a whole host of different ways that is the kind of picture Joshua is calling the people to you're in the land now stick with God in this loving obedience to enjoy the blessing he promises and that's the same message that's the same call to those of us who are

Christians this morning Joshua would say to us maybe you're a new Christian maybe you have recently come to know Jesus to accept the forgiveness he brings and that is amazing that is brilliant well Joshua this morning is encouraging us not to take our foot off the gas not to lose that first love and enthusiasm but to continue clinging to Jesus and not to let that initial commitment dwindle and other things take his place as priorities in our life or perhaps the other end of the spectrum perhaps you've been a Christian for a long time and that's great news and we celebrate that yet God's word here reminds us that as we enjoy the rest Jesus offers for us to keep our love for God and obedience to him as the number one priority in our lives that the Christian life is not like riding a bike where you know once you've got the hang of it you don't really need to think of it it doesn't need your full attention no it needs that ongoing determination and commitment that Joshua spells out here to loving obedience of our faithful God it feels as well that this passage seems particularly relevant for us in this stage of our life as a church as well it's not that long since we moved from being kind of formally a church plant to being an established congregation just been speaking about how God willing in the next few months we'll be meeting in a building that we're able to call our own these are great things and great things to celebrate and yet I think it is also a time of danger for us as a church because it will be so easy for us to think you know we've made it you know that God has got us to the top of the mountain and from there just to switch into cruise control and functionally even though we'd never say it to think well that's really kind of job done now we don't need that same dependence on God we've kind of got what we need and yet the message of Joshua this morning is saying that that would be fatal to our life as a church that we need to keep on being very careful to love the Lord our God wholeheartedly to continue to depend upon the God who has brought us to this point that's Joshua's message a call to obedience and love enjoying

[17:54] God's blessing now just before we move on how do we do that where does the rubber hit the road in some ways we've spoken about how Joshua uses these active words be strong cling be careful what does that action really look like I think the answer to that is simply what we've already seen it's that constant remembering of God's faithfulness to his word of God's rescue through the gospel it's looking back to Jesus time and time again it's the proactive choices we make to ensure that the record of God's goodness to us seen in Jesus seen in the gospel is at the front and center of our minds day by day it's that commitment that says each day I need to be in God's word reminding myself of all he has done for me because I know otherwise I'm so easily distracted the commitment that says Sunday morning church is where me and my family need to be again hearing the gospel story being refreshed in that and encouraging others it is the effort the carefulness that Joshua talks about that says when I feel far from God when I'm really struggling in that way rather than just leave it and you know just see if things will gradually change and sort themselves out that actually is careful to all the more draw on

God's word and fellowship within the church that wrestles in prayer that we would grasp God's ongoing faithfulness to his word and be reminded again that even though we don't perhaps feel it we can know that we can trust in a faithful God because he has done that in the past and he will continue to be faithful into the future Joshua is a book recording God's faithfulness it says we look to that faithfulness seen above all in the gospel that we live this life of obedience and love that Joshua here calls God's people to enjoying God's blessings that ultimate blessing of relationship with him of forgiveness in anticipation of an eternal home with him because of what Jesus has done and so we stick with God and continue to have him as the priority in our life and in some ways that would be a really nice kind of place to wrap things up this morning wouldn't it

God's faithfulness to us and our faithful response to him and yet you'll have noticed as we read through Joshua chapter 23 that speech of Joshua that that is not where Joshua finishes his speech Joshua here really wants to underline God's word really wants to underline to us this morning the importance of remaining faithful it does that with the kind of the positive picture we've already seen it does that also by outlining the nature and the danger of failing to do that we see finally Joshua's warning of compromise and unfaithfulness bringing God's curse I don't know if other people remember this or these when I was growing up I don't know if they still have them but there was a series of particularly graphic and grim television adverts about the dangers of not wearing seatbelts in cars and they had kind of blood and guts everywhere and I think some people were quite offended by them some people thought they were a bit too much my mum did not like them but the point was they worked they had an effect and now in our country it's almost unthought of for people to not put their seatbelt on people have seen the dangers of that they worked and that's why the advertising companies used them in some ways that's a bit like what

Joshua is doing here in this final section of his speech in chapter 23 he is not sugar coating things but he is giving us an accurate picture of the danger of failing to stick with God a danger that is a danger to all of us that none of us can take for granted now we see what that looks like in verse 7 it's given here as a kind of alternative to obedience and that alternative is compromise it is a lack of distinctiveness from those around them and look how we get into this slide this descent in verse 7 at first it's simply mixing with the nations around them these were the anti-God nations that they'd been called to drive out of the land but actually the first step is that they're happy to tolerate them to mingle with them we see then the consequences of that unfolding the next stage is that they are mentioning the names of the gods of these nations holding these gods alongside the true

God and then it's as if the kind of slippery slope steepens as they are swearing by them serving them bowing down to them what started as you know just a bit of a mix just a bit of a compromise ends up in full blown idolatry and unfaithfulness to the true God to the God who has brought them to this point and blessed them in so many ways verse 12 we're given another description again the contrast is highlighted rather than obeying the call to cling to the Lord your God that we saw earlier here the warning is against clinging to the remnant of these nations among you and making marriages with them again being intertwined with partnering with in covenant relationship with the very people whom God was calling them to drive out again really important to stress here this is not a matter of race or nationality this is a matter of allegiance the reason

[24:04] Joshua sounds this alarm regarding joining with the nations around them is not because of where they are from but it's because of who these nations serve the warning for us here is against being shaped by going along with those who do not recognize the Lord those who do not obey his word those who do not love him those who do not have him as a priority in their life they don't even recognize him and his rule in their life now that doesn't mean not having any friends who aren't Christians that would be an equally unhealthy thing but the question we're being called to ask here is how do those we know and work around and live with who are not Christians how is their life and their attitude shaping us where are the areas of our life where it's so tempting to think that's just what everyone does nowadays or that's what everyone thinks or that's what everyone else is doing their temptation just to mix in with the crowd just not to make a farce it's not a big deal and it begins as in

Joshua we're not actively denying God we are just open to this as well and yet Joshua says that's deadly it puts us on that slope to ruin how do we let our colleagues influence us at after work drinks how does what we watch shape our view of what is good and wholesome or the example of this passage in marriage where we prioritize someone who will first and foremost encourage us in our faith and lead us in that way or for us again collectively as a church I think as far as I'm aware we've got a fairly good name and positive relationships in the community as far as that goes I think that's a good thing but there will come a time and this will become in some ways accelerated as we become more high profile having a property in the town there will come a time when we'll face that decision what if protecting that popularity and reputation means just being willing to play down some of the things that the

Bible teaches just being willing to kind of hold some things that we believe alongside other things that we don't really believe but we don't want to rock the boat being willing to soften the message of the gospel just a little bit perhaps the situation of kind of battle and conquest in Joshua seems far from us but actually this principle of compromise leading to unfaithfulness is a real and daily challenge for all of us and Joshua here is kind of ringing the bell for how dangerous that is because just as God is faithful to his word in terms of blessing those who cling to him so we read that he is faithful to his word in terms of judging those who cling to the world around and who in doing so pledge their allegiance and their obedience to the gods of the world verses 15 and 16

Joshua closes his speech with this really stark warning but just as all the good things that the Lord your God promised concerning you have been fulfilled for you so the Lord will bring upon you all the evil things until he has destroyed you from off this good land that the Lord your God has given you if you transgress the covenant of the Lord your God which he commanded you and go and serve other gods and bow down to them then the anger of the Lord will be kindled against you and you shall perish quickly from off the good land that he has given you those are stark words aren't they but just as God is faithful to his word in terms of blessing so God is faithful to his word in terms of judgment that sin will be dealt with if we want a faithful God we can depend upon we cannot have it any other way for us to continue to enjoy the rest the forgiveness the relationship those blessings

Jesus brings as our saviour we need to continue living with Jesus as our Lord and really important as we come to order close this passage is not here to kind of undercut our assurance even as we seek to live with Jesus as Lord we all sin and God is faithful to forgive us when we turn to him in that but this passage is here to warn us not to take our eyes off God and not to take the blessings of the gospel for granted not to be blind to the constant danger of turning back to the world around us of being conformed into its image of bowing down to its gods of acceptance of popularity of a comfortable life of me as king and in charge and Joshua closes with a stark warning here and everything in me wants to soften off the sharp edges of this chapter but I'm going to try not to do that because this is what Joshua does this is the way Joshua finishes what he's saying and because perhaps this is a wake up call that some of us need this morning that as we rest in the gospel that we would keep God as our number one priority because the danger of shipwrecking our faith is real the path of exchanging the blessings of forgiveness for the curse of God's righteous anger at sin is a path that many have walked down it happens as we put the world ahead of

[30 : 05] Jesus it happens as we neglect what he has done it happens as we fail to cling to him for all he has promised to do it happens as we fail to remember his faithfulness in all he has done and rather Joshua rings for us this morning this warning bell that we might continue as individuals and as a church in loving obedience of our faithful God enjoying his blessing in the present until that day Jesus returns and finds his people those who have trusted in him those who have continued to depend on him for forgiveness and righteousness and leads us to our eternal home with him let's pray together heavenly father we thank you for your faithfulness to us thank you that you are a God we can depend on now and always thank you that you have shown your faithfulness through sending

Jesus to suffer in our place that we might be forgiven that you have kept your promise to redeem a people for yourself and we thank you that you have done that at the greatest cost not even held back your own son and that because of that we can be confident that you will remain faithful into the future that you will always be with us that you will always be ready to forgive when we turn to you and that you will never let us down and Lord we ask that you would help us to rightly respond to your faithfulness by living in loving obedience to you we ask that motivated by your gospel you would help us remain fixed on living as your people with you as our number one priority we pray that you would protect us from the subtle and slow and gradual slide into becoming indistinguishable from the world around us we ask rather that you would help us to stand firm aware of alert to the great danger of neglecting our dependence on you and in light of the great blessing and perfect eternal home that you promise to those who continue to live with Jesus as Lord might we cling to him day by day

Lord we pray that you would help us to turn to you in repentance when we make mistakes and to continue to seek to live distinctive lives whatever the cost of that might be pointing to you and to your glory and pray that in response to your great faithfulness we would be faithful to you and we pray all of these things in Jesus precious name Amen