

“AND THE LORD GAVE THEM REST”:
A CHRISTIAN READING OF THE BOOK OF JOSHUA

THE KEEPER OF THE COVENANT
(JOSHUA 24:16-28)

I. Introduction

II. Ritual Dialogue (Joshua 24:16-24)

A. Israel: “Far Be It from Us” (Joshua 24:16-18)

1. Having heard the rehearsal of the Lord’s works, and Joshua’s exhortation to fear and to serve the Lord, we now come to Israel’s actual response.
2. The people give a confident answer: “Then the people answered, ‘Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods’ (v 16).
3. The reason for this is given in verses 17-18.
 - a. There is no way that Israel will abandon the Lord, because of all the love and goodness that the Lord has shown to Israel.
 - b. From verses 17-18, Israel gives to Joshua a condensed version of salvation history. It includes the acknowledgement that...
 - i. the Lord brought Israel out from Egypt (v 17).
 - ii. the Lord accomplished “great signs” and preserved Israel in the wilderness (v 17).
 - iii. the Lord drove out “all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land” (v 18).
4. In response to all the Lord had done for them, Israel declares, “Therefore we also will serve the LORD, for he is our God.”
5. We have come to expect this response because of Israel’s excellent track record all throughout Joshua—Israel has been faithful to the Lord and obeys all that his servant commands.

B. Joshua: “You Are not Able” (Joshua 24:19-23)

1. Joshua’s response to Israel is interesting. Instead of praising Israel for their response, “But Joshua said to the people, ‘You are not able to serve the LORD...’” (v 19).
2. The reasons for Israel’s inability to serve the Lord is as follows: “...for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God...”
 - a. Joshua is reminding Israel of the tremendously high standards that God places on his people.
 - b. Because God is a holy and jealous God and Israel is prone to idolatry and all manner of sinfulness, Israel needs to consider the cost of entering into covenant with such a God.
3. Then comes the most disturbing words of this verse: “he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins.”

- a. God has provided a system of animal sacrifices to mediate forgiveness to his people.
 - b. But if Israel does not live in ongoing repentance before the Lord, if Israel persists in their sins to the point where the nation returns to idol worship, then the Lord will punish his people.
4. In verse 20, Joshua speaks about the real possibility of a national turning from the Lord: “If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm and consume you, after having done you good.”
5. How exactly will this destruction look like? Simply go back to Deuteronomy 28, there we find the curses that God says will descend on Israel if they sin against him.
- a. Just to give us an idea what these curses will be, only listen to what the Lord says in verses 15 to 19.

But if you will not obey the voice of the LORD your God or be careful to do all his commandments and his statutes that I command you today, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you. Cursed shall you be in the city, and cursed shall you be in the field. Cursed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl. Cursed shall be the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your ground, the increase of your herds and the young of your flock. Cursed shall you be when you come in, and cursed shall you be when you go out.

- b. The list comes to a climax in 24:63: “And as the LORD took delight in doing you good and multiplying you, so the LORD will take delight in bringing ruin upon you and destroying you. And you shall be plucked off the land that you are entering to take possession of it.”
 - c. If Israel turns away from the Lord to false gods, then Israel as a people will be scattered to the winds. The Lord will destroy his people. This is the great curse that is attached to the covenant between Israel and the Lord.
6. When Joshua says that God will not forgive the sins of his people, he is not saying anything new. He is simply reminding Israel sternly about what the Lord had promised he would do a long time ago.
- C. Israel: “We Will Serve the LORD” (Joshua 24:21)
- D. Joshua: “You Are Witnesses Against Yourselves” (Joshua 24:22)
- 1. Having heard the people, Joshua says to them, “You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen the LORD, to serve him.”
 - 2. In other words, since the people had already accepted the terms and the conditions of service to the Lord, their words will come back to haunt them if they should break faith with the Lord.
- E. Israel: “We Are Witnesses” (Joshua 24:22)
- F. Joshua: “Put Away the Foreign Gods” (Joshua 24:23)
- 1. So Joshua calls on Israel to do two things:
 - a. “Then put away the foreign gods that are among you...”
 - b. “...and incline your heart to the LORD, the God of Israel.”
 - 2. God is restating the same commandments that had always been urging for Israel to obey.

- a. God wants Israel to remove any foreign gods that remain among them.
 - b. God wants Israel to bend their hearts toward him.
 - c. So once again, you see this emphasis on the interior life. The response to idolatry and other forms of sin is not simply stopping those sins. It's a deep and heartfelt allegiance, affection, and reverence toward the Lord.
3. The holy love and fear of the Lord, which manifests itself in joyful obedience to the Lord's instructions—that is the kind of holiness that God is looking for. That is the standard of holiness to which God holds his people.
 4. *Where is your heart with the Lord today, at this point in your life? Are you growing in your attachment to the Lord or are you growing more and more attached to the gods of this world?*
 5. It is far easier to destroy the physical idols than it is to uproot the idols of our hearts. We need to constantly pray that God would strengthen our love and reverence to him, and our trust in him.
- G. Israel: "The LORD Our God We Will Serve" (24:24)
1. In the last part of the ritual dialogue, the people reaffirm their allegiance to the Lord YHWH: "And the people said to Joshua, 'The LORD our God we will serve, and his voice we will obey.'"
 2. This is now about the third or the fourth time in this passage that the people have reaffirmed their obedience to the Lord.

***Questions for reflection:** (1) How does 24:16-24 read like a dialogue? (2) Why does Joshua say that Israel is not able to serve the Lord (v 19)? (3) What does Joshua mean when he says that the Lord is "a holy God" and "a jealous God"? (4) How does Israel respond to Joshua's warnings against being too quick to promise obedience? (5) What is your impression of Israel at this point? (6) What are the curses that will come on Israel for their disobedience (cf. Dt 28)? (7) Where is your heart with the Lord today, at this point in your life? Are you growing in your attachment to the Lord or are you growing more and more attached to the gods of this world?

III. The Covenant Renewed (Joshua 24:25-28)

- A. Beginning in verse 25, we come to the actual renewal of the covenant itself.
- B. The people have said their vows. And now, it is time to make official the covenant. Verse 25: "So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and put in place statutes and rules for them at Shechem."
- C. Joshua also "put in place statutes and rules for them." The language here seems to suggest that these are new rules in addition to the ones that were given by Moses. But more likely, these are a republication of the same rules and laws that Moses had given to Israel a long time ago.
- D. Verse 26 tells us that "Joshua wrote these words in the Book of the Law of God."
 1. This sheds light on the formation of the Old Testament.
 2. The Book of the Law of God may be the first five books of the Bible, the Torah.
 3. By adding these words to the Torah, Joshua, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, was adding new material to the Scriptures—material that would be incorporated into the final form of the book of Joshua that we now have.

- E. Then Joshua “took a large stone and set it up there under the terebinth that was by the sanctuary of the LORD.”
 1. The purpose of this stone was, in Joshua’s words, to be “a witness against us, for it has heard all the words of the LORD that he spoke to us. Therefore it shall be a witness against you, lest you deal falsely with your God” (v 27).
- F. “Joshua sent the people away, every man to his inheritance” (v 28).
—Israel is set to begin its new chapter of life as a settled nation. The work of culture-formation has begun.

***Questions for reflection:** (1) How does Joshua respond to Israel’s promises in 24:25-27? (2) How does this covenant stand in relation to the Mosaic covenant made in Ex 19? (3) Verse 26 tells us that “Joshua wrote these words in the Book of the Law of God.” What possible light does this shed on the development of the Old Testament canon?

IV. Evangelization and Culture Formation

- A. The Church is called to form a society and culture based on the Word of God, rooted in the love and fear of God, revolving around the Will of God.
- B. As believers who are sincere about our Faith, it is very difficult for us to keep our faith and the rest of our lives separate.
 1. The Christian Faith is a totalizing faith.
 2. It supplies us not just with lists of duties.
 3. It also gives us a way of interpreting and assessing the world around us—so giving us wisdom to make decisions where the Word of God does not clearly pronounce on issues.
- C. That is the great pressure that secular societies place upon us today.
 1. There is pressure for Christians *not* to keep the Sabbath. This is especially true for students.
 2. There is pressure to live hurried lives, such that personal prayer, study of Scripture, and just simply acts of friendship becomes difficult.
 3. There is pressure to keep on making money, because the cost of living is rising.
- D. At its heart, the world system is mercilessly unfriendly to the values of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of Man.
- E. If our Israelite forefathers found it hard to build and sustain their godly civilization, how much harder is it for the Church today, which has no political clout, military power, or visible state unity of any kind?
- F. Yet, the work of civilization-building and culture-formation continues, because the Law of God was meant to go out of Israel and become the wisdom of the nations (cf. Mic 4:2).
- G. The calling of the Church is to teach the Law wherever she is placed, to show the world, with truth and grace, what God requires, and how God wants us to prioritize our values.
- H. God’s values are in Micah 6:8: “He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”

1. Being God's light in this world requires that we go down to the depths of our deepest and most ingrained values and let God's Word to bring order to those values.
2. The work of evangelization and culture-formation is therefore work at a very deep, subterranean level. We seek to bring all our values and priorities under the rule of Jesus Christ the Lord.
3. Having put away our most obvious idols, we must now begin putting away the invisible, subtle idols that our society tries to sell to us.
4. Instead of being ruled by the fears of society—fears that lead us to busy our families into disintegration; fears that drive us to pressure our children into depression—we choose to be ruled by the fruit of the Spirit: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness” (Gal 5:20).

***Questions for reflection:** (1) Why is culture-formation part of the Church's work of evangelization and discipleship? (2) Why is it impossible (or very difficult) for believers to keep their Christian faith out of touch with the world? (3) What are God's values for his people according to Micah 6:8? (4) How can we be more influenced by the fruit of the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:20) than the fears of society?

V. The Kingdom Is from the Lord

No one ever became holy by discouraging, saddening, or agitating himself into holiness. Salvation has always been from the Lord. Just as we receive our justification by faith, we also receive our final salvation and the kingdom of God by faith in Jesus Christ. Psalm 119:8-9 says,

⁸ **It is better to take refuge in the LORD
than to trust in man.**

⁹ **It is better to take refuge in the LORD
than to trust in princes.**

The same wisdom applies here: It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in our own good intentions. The holy resolve that we need is found in Jesus alone—Jesus who fulfilled the covenant of the Law; Jesus who obeyed the Lord even to the point of death; Jesus who took the curses of the Law upon himself and exhausted them once and for all. And Jesus gives this holy and joyful resolve to those who come to him in faith. Let us go to him and ask him for it.

***Questions for reflection:** (1) To whom do we go to find holy resolve to persevere in our good works? (2) Why do you think it is vital for us to constantly return again and again to Jesus?