

On April 22, 1527 a dizzy spell forced the leader of the protestant movement, Martin Luther, to stop preaching in the middle of his sermon. For ten years, since publishing his *95 Theses* against the abuse of indulgences, Luther had been battered by political and theological storms; several times his very life had been in danger. Now... after 10 years of struggles... because of his Biblical convictions... Martin Luther faced another battle with a fellow protestant... He contended with the Swiss protestant reformer (Ulrich Zwingli) through a back and forth correspondence. Their dispute was over the meaning of the Lord's Supper. To Luther, Zwingli's position was as dangerous as the doctrinal errors of the Roman Catholic Church. To Luther --the very gospel was at stake--and he was deeply disturbed and angry. Consequently... Luther suffered severe depression... and physical ailments.

On July 6, as friends arrived for dinner, Luther felt an intense buzzing in his left ear. He went to lie down, when suddenly he called, "*Water or I'll die!*" He became cold, and he was convinced he had seen his last night. In a loud prayer, he surrendered himself to God's will.

With a doctor's help, Luther partially regained his strength. But this depression and illness overcame him again in August... September... and late December. ...Looking back on one of his illness attacks, he wrote his friend Philip Melanchthon, "*I spent more than a week in death and hell. My entire body was in pain, and I still tremble. Completely abandoned by Christ, I labored under the vacillations and storms of desperation and blasphemy against God. But through the prayers of the saints [his friends], God began to have mercy on me and pulled my soul from the inferno below.*"

Also, in August, the plague had erupted in Wittenberg. As fear spread, many of the townspeople fled the city. But Luther considered it his duty to remain and care for the sick. Even though his wife was pregnant, Luther's house was transformed into a hospital, and he watched many friends die. Then his son became ill. Not until late November did the epidemic subside and the ill begin to recover.

Even after all his difficulties of that horrific year... Luther took time to remember the tenth anniversary of his nailing the 95 thesis to the church door... noting the deeper meaning of his strenuous trials: "*The only comfort against raging Satan is that we have God's Word to save the souls of believers.*" Luther expanded that thought into the hymn he is most famous for: "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." Here is one verse from that powerful hymn:

*And though this world with devils filled
should threaten to undo us,
We will not fear, for God has willed
His truth to triumph through us.
The prince of darkness grim? We tremble not for him.
His rage we can endure, for lo! his doom is sure.
One little Word shall fell him.*

God has willed His truth to triumph through us! Can you say "Amen!" to that...? ... God has willed His truth to triumph through us! We have God's Word to save the souls of believers... and He has willed... and He has promised... for us to have victory... even though you and I face trials which threaten to undo us...!

We have this assurance... but we must move forward... Our spiritual efforts must remain intense. We need to continue on with a vigilant determination. There is no room for anyone's complacency.

As we come to the final two chapters in our study of the Book of Joshua... we see General Joshua express a deep concern because he observed a growing **complacency** on the part of Israel. ... With Israel's enemies practically defeated... Joshua knew well the danger of the people's "letting down." ... Before his departure from this earth... he felt compelled to warn them... that continued obedience to God's commands... was essential to continued enjoyment of His blessing.

So Joshua calls two councils together... the first is what chapter 23 is concerned with... and the second is found in chapter 24. ... Joshua's final speeches... are to Israel's leaders (in chapter 23)... and in chapter 24... it is his charge to the people of Israel. ... The need was for them to stay vigilant... not to become complacent... and Joshua presents to them strong motives for their not letting down.

The central issue for Joshua is... faithfulness to God and to His Word. Faithfulness must have priority over any other issue. ... In the life of the church... faithfulness is more important than any doctrinal issue... church government style or structure... program... personal temperament... personal gifting... or even spiritual gifting. ... It is what will determine whether you and I are successful or not. ... Are we faithful to God and His Word!?

The explicit danger of crossing the Jordan River... facing an enemy in a strange land... encountering the unknown on every hand... and meeting fear on every side... had kept Israel close to the Lord. ... They knew that they were dependent upon Him for survival. ... Now... those frightening days are over. ... Joshua recognized that this was a time of great concern. He understood that... since they had entered into rest... and were enjoying prosperity and plenty... the Israelites would drift away from God. ... That is the story of human nature. It never changes.

The hardest test that you and I face... is the test of prosperity. ... The most dangerous period any one of us can go through... is not a period of freight-filled danger and suffering. ... It is the time of peace and plenty. ... The test is: Will we stay as close to the Lord... as we do when we feel threatened... or are hurting...?

In these two deathbed speeches by Joshua... we will see him emphasize 1) Israel's possessing the land, and 2) their enjoying its blessings. While Israel had gained control of Canaan... there still remained territory to possess and pockets of resistance to overcome. ... The task of the tribes wasn't finished! ... The great danger... of course... was that the people of Israel would gradually change their attitudes toward the pagan nations around them... and start accepting their ways and imitating them.

For you and I... it is a matter of possessing our new-life in Christ... and enjoying its blessings. ... There still remains territory... of our own thought-life to take captive to the obedience of Christ... and pockets of resistance to overcome. ... Although we have new life in Christ... there is still work for us to do. ... The great danger... of course... is that we might gradually change

our attitude toward the world and its practices... and start accepting its ways and imitating it.

To counteract this danger, Joshua gave the Israelites (and us) three strong motives for remaining a separated people and serving the Lord faithfully.

What the Lord did for His people (Josh. 23:3-4).

What the Lord said to His people (Josh. 23:5-10).

What the Lord would do to His people (Josh. 23:11-16).

So let's turn to Joshua's deathbed speeches now... and learn from the motivation he provides... to stay as close to the Lord in good times... as well as the harder times.

Joshua 23:1-2

The people had probably been experiencing the *rest* of God for over twenty years. This is known because of Joshua's age: at the end of the conquest of the Promised Land, he was approximately the age of Caleb who was 85 years old (Joshua 14:10). Joshua died at the age of 110 (Joshua 24:29). So there is most likely a twenty to twenty-five year period when Israel was experiencing God's *rest* under the leadership of this great servant of God.

We are going to read some strong admonitions to be faithful. ... But underneath the imperatives is going to be the wonderful reminder of God's faithfulness. ... The reason we have any hope at all of being faithful is because of His absolute commitment to be faithful to us in our lives.

Joshua 23:3

If we are to remain faithful... in other words... if we are to keep our spiritual guard on high alert... we need to give God all the credit... for every single thing that is accomplished. Give Him all the credit for who you are... and what you are able to do!

I don't know about you... but my hindsight... often isn't very good. ... When I'm in the middle of a difficult struggle in ministry... I can usually remember to focus on the Lord... call out to Him... and depend on Him. ... But when things have gone really well... I'm much too quick to give myself credit for how things have gone. ... I end up thinking... I did a pretty good job of handling that.

Joshua's reminder here... prompts me to stay focused on the fact that good and perfect gifts come from the Lord... not from me. ... He is the One Who has won the battle over sin and death and hell. ... He is the giver of life and health and opportunity – and... any effectiveness in ministry.

Notice how Joshua places such responsibility on those who have witnessed the work of God... to keep a vital faithfulness among God's people. ... These men who have both seen Yahweh's mighty work in the conquest and will outlive Joshua... bear a special responsibility to anchor Israel in spiritual faithfulness to the Lord.

We... too... as witnesses to God's grace... have a peculiar responsibility... to anchor spiritual faithfulness in those who have not witnessed what we have. Unlike Israel's leaders... we did not see what happened the moment the priests' feet touched the Jordan. ... We did not hear the roar of Jericho's crumbling walls. ... We did not hide in the ambush at Ai... ... We did witness the sun stand still... in order to finish off our enemies... But we have the

record of it — even more record of God’s work... than Joshua’s audience at his deathbed had. ... And we have the witness of victory after victory in our own life. ... We have a particular responsibility to the generation behind us. (Let me say more specifically...) We have a particular responsibility to children of KIDS Church... to the AWANA ministries... and to the student ministries of our church.

None of it is boring or tedious or dull... as though the next generation would only yawn. ... What is dull about a God who became flesh... in order to save us... and give us eternal life...?

Luke 12:48b (ESV)

...Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required,

Joshua 23:4-5

Foundational to our call to be faithful is the positive promise of God's faithfulness to us. ... In verse 5 Joshua promises that there **will be** success in ministry... at least from God's perspective. The conquest was complete... all of the land had been allocated to the twelve tribes. ... But... as mentioned before... the struggle is not over. ... There are pockets of resistance from some of the Canaanite residents who are still there. ... And these Canaanites are going to try to seduce Israel away from their love and obedience to the Lord.

Joshua's object is to furnish the basis for their confidence. He wants those who remain to be sure of Yahweh's help. He grounds them in this assurance by appealing to Yahweh's promise.

If we are to remain faithful... we are going to need to be grounded in God's promises. ... This is what Martin Luther was attempting to do with his hymn writing.

*The prince of darkness grim? We tremble not for him.
His rage we can endure, for lo! his doom is sure.
One little Word shall fell him.*

Joshua 23:6

A key to our remaining faithful... is to immerse ourselves in the Word of God. Not only will we know many promises from God that we can depend on... but we will develop a more intimate relationship with it's Author – God, Himself.

The psalmist compared the Bible to honey. It is food that is good to eat. When I take the word seriously and meditate on it... it's not just that I learn a lot more Bible information. ... I fall more deeply in love with the divine Author as I read it conversationally with Him. I know Him at much deeper levels.

One of the concerns I've heard... is that if I challenge people to read their Bible every day... then I am encouraging legalism. ... But let me tell you... the result in my life when I read the Bible seriously and interactively is the exact opposite of legalism. ... The result is... actually... greater freedom... the ability to live life more gracefully and creatively.

Arthur Rubinstein, the world-famous pianist, wrote years ago about the importance of practicing every day: "If I don't practice one day, nobody knows. If I don't practice two days, then I know. But if I don't practice three

days, the whole world can tell." If I am not in the Word one day... then nobody will know. If I miss two days... then I know. If I miss three days... the whole world... certainly my wife and family... knows!

We are called to immerse ourselves in the word of God... to sell ourselves out to it... if we want God to bless us in the ministry responsibility he calls us to. It is one of the keys to staying faithful.

In verse 7 Joshua warns of a three-step process... a logical progression that will happen if they're not careful. ... First... the Israelites will associate with these nations on the basis of comfortable friendship with no concern for their salvation. ... They won't think about it or pray about it... they will have no such intent. ... Second... they will start discussing the Canaanite religious practices. ... And third... because Canaanite culture and religion are much more sophisticated... and attractive sensually... and aesthetically than Israelite worship is... the Israelites will be drawn into... and overwhelmed by them... and they will give in to the temptation to worship these other gods.

Joshua 23:7

Joshua warned them that their disobedience would be a gradual thing. ... Believer! I hope that you will erase from your vocabulary the phrase... "*Fall into sin.*" ... A Christian never simply "falls into sin." It is never a matter that a Christian wakes up one day and (for example) goes out and commits adultery. Rather it has been a gradual process of several steps. It may start with an innocent noticing of an attractive person of the opposite sex... a live person... or someone on television or a magazine. The look

suddenly becomes a drinking-in... a conscience effort of burning into the mind of an image. Then comes impure thoughts that are not immediately rejected... but are allowed to linger. Next comes an active seeking out of more images perhaps even pornography... This may go on for a while... but then there comes an openness to act out on wrongful sexual desire... next comes the seeking for an opportunity to act on it... then comes the opportunity. No... it isn't a sudden **fall** into sin... it is a step-step-step-step down into sin. And knowing this... we can interrupt the process. ...Some who are listening to me right now... are on one of those low steps. You haven't committed an actual physical act of adultery... but you are a lot closer to a major crisis than you think.

The compromising Christian is not a happy one. ... Sin scourges and robs your life. ... You might get what you want... in the short-term... but lose what you had. ... You might get your desires... but lose your delight. ... You may enjoy your sin... but you'll lose your serenity and peace. You might love the fleshly deeds... but lose your freedom and determination. ...Sin affects our goals... dreams... and vision for God. ... As we move through Joshua's speech... we will find that God said judgment would be for certain because of the disobedience of His people.

Start saying "No" to the sin you are playing with... at whatever step you are on. Climb back up... and separate yourself from it. ... Joshua makes it clear that there is no room for neutrality concerning sinful living.

Joshua 23:8

Joshua calls us to hang on to the Lord. ... The literal call is for the people of God to firmly attach themselves exclusively to the Lord in willing... practical obedience. ... And the promise is that as long as we're holding on tight to the Lord... God will honor what we do.

The word “cling” is an interesting word. It is the Hebrew word... *dabaq*. It means to stick to... to keep close... to follow closely. How do we cleave to the Lord...? One of the Bible commentators that I was reading came up with a brief acronym using the letters of this word...

C—CONFESS your sin to Him.

L—LOVE THE LORD

E—EXAMINE yourself, your attitudes and actions daily.

A—APPLY the Word of God in your life and be **AVAILABLE** to Him.

V—VOICE your prayers to the Lord.

E—EXPLORE God's Word daily.

To motivate us to cleave like this... in verses 9-10 Joshua highlights the grace of God. ... But in verses 11-13... he appeals to the fear of God. Joshua argues from the memory of Yahweh's goodness... and then he turns right around and he appeals to the threat of Yahweh's judgment. (LISTEN!)... Both the grace of God and the fear of God are needed to move the people of God.

Joshua 23:9-13

God kept all His promises... and He had every right to expect Israel to keep all His commandments as well. ... Some of God's promises are unconditional... but some of them are conditional and depend on our obedience for their fulfillment. ... Israel entered and conquered the land as the fulfillment of God's promise... but their enjoyment of the land depended on their obedience to the Law of the Lord. ... God would enable them to claim all their inheritance if they would obey Him with all their hearts.

God's Word never fails... whether it's the Word of promise for blessing... or the Word of promise for disciplining. ... The Word of God is like a two-edged sword: If we obey it... God will bless and help us... if we disobey it... God will chasten us until we submit to Him. Both are evidences of His love, for

Proverbs 3:11-12 (ESV)

My son, do not despise the LORD's discipline or be weary of his reproof, for the LORD reproofs him whom he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights.

Hebrews 12:6 (ESV)

For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives."

Charles Spurgeon said, "God will not allow His children to sin successfully."

If Israel began to mingle with these nations, two things would happen: God would remove His blessing, and Israel would be defeated; and these nations would bring distress and defeat to Israel. Joshua used vivid words like *snare*s, *traps*, *scourges*, and *thorns* to impress the Jews with the suffering they would experience if they disobeyed the Lord. The final stroke of chastening would be Israel's removal from their land to a land of exile.

After all, if you want to live and worship like the Gentiles, then live with the Gentiles! This happened when God permitted Babylon to conquer Judah, destroy Jerusalem, and take thousands of the Jews into exile in Babylon.

Because of rebellion and disobedience, God's people have suffered immeasurably... throughout history.

- They were removed from the land by Babylon for 70 years.
- They were persecuted by Syria's Antiochus Epiphanes.
- The Roman, General Titus, destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple. He captured and killed thousands of people.
- The Jews were persecuted in the Middle Ages and in the Spanish Inquisition.
- They suffered in the ghettos of Warsaw in WW2.
- Millions were roasted in the crematoriums at Auschwitz and Dachau.

We find a profound principle with verse 11...

Joshua 23:11

This is a call to intense self-examination. If we are to remain faithful... then we need to examine ourselves regularly: *Do I love God more than anything? ... Do I love Him more than my job... my family... or even the ministry in the church that He has given to me...?*

Whatever love we have to give Him... is just a response to His great love for us. ... The amount of time we invest with Him in reading His Word will dramatically affect our responding in love back to Him. The apostle John said, "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). Passion for God

isn't something I have to crank up. It's part of who He is, and as I get to know Him better... that love is imparted to me. ... We all know how easy it is to grow cold in our love for God... and distant from Him... and to stop interacting with the Lord. ... But the call in verse 11 is to keep the fire of passion for the Lord burning... and the best way to do that is to spend regular time with Him... together in His Word.

Joshua 23:14

Verse 14... here... focuses on a wonderful positive motivation... the goodness and faithfulness of God. After reading this verse... we are ready to stand and sing (in our finest devotional mood)... 'Great Is Thy Faithfulness'. ... Get the benediction ready! Let's end on a high note!

But Joshua has a different way to end his goodbye speech. He has one more point to make. It is that we do not have a tame... safe God... but One Who is faithful to heal... **and** to destroy. ... Unlike Santa Claus... Yahweh is holy and His threats are not empty gobbledygook.

Joshua 23:15-16

At first glance we might think it's pretty rotten news... that we're going to get it... if we violate God's faithfulness to us. ... But do you know why God drove his people into exile... first in Assyria... and then in Babylon... and allowed them seventy years of suffering? ... Do you know why God allows discipline in our lives... when we disobey Him and ignore what we know to be true? ... The Bible says it's because He loves us so much.

In Deuteronomy 6... Moses tells the nation that God chose them out of love. ... He singled them out not because they deserved it... or because they were especially big or impressive... but because He just decided to love them. ... All the teaching about God's covenant love in the Pentateuch stresses its unbreakable nature. ... It talks about how God cleaves (this is the same word again) to the nation Israel. ... He will not let them go in spite of their rebellion and resistance to Him.

After this history of the conquest, there is the period of the judges... and it's a horrible history. ... Over and over again the nation does what it wants to do. ... But God still won't let them go. There is a wonderful verse in Isaiah just before the fall of the northern kingdom where God pleads with the nation...

Isaiah 1:18 (ESV)

"Come now, let us reason together, says the LORD: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.

God says, "It's not too late to be reasonable, to renew faithfulness to me in love. I don't want to discipline you."

The prophet Hosea also quotes the Lord. Even though they're finally driven into exile, God still can't quit loving them (14:4-5):

Hosea 14:4-5 (ESV)

I will heal their apostasy; I will love them freely, for my anger has turned from them. I will be like the dew to Israel; he shall blossom like the lily; he shall take root like the trees of Lebanon;

Even in the midst of God's discipline in our lives... His love is at work.

The good news about hearing a message like this is that if any of these issues have made you uncomfortable... if God has told you you're drifting... and you don't sense that you have the courage and resolve to remain faithful... I want to encourage you to RIGHT NOW... stop and pray... ask God to heal your heart. ... Ask Him to give you a heart of gratitude for His faithfulness... and eyes to notice it. Ask Him for a heart of obedience to His Word... a heart of trust in Him and His resources exclusively... and a heart of love for Him that is more intense than anything.