

The Lord Himself Has Fought to Give you Rest

Joshua 23:1-11 • 2020-07-19



“Can I have a snack?” echoes across the room while someone is standing in front of a stove busy preparing a meal. My wife usually prepares the meals in our home. But I do too on occasion, so I know how it feels. She’ll reply with a gentle, “No, I’m making supper.” She will often spend a lot of time planning out a meal for the family. She’ll even give up a big part of the day. She does it so that a delicious and healthy meal is prepared. Waiting can be hard when you don’t appreciate all the hard work behind a meal. Could you even begin to imagine the frustration she’d feel if everyone just decided to ignore her and eat a bunch of pop-tarts and candy right before supper? This might happen when it comes to small things like family mealtime. What about when it happens with more important things such as all the good things the Lord has prepared for us? That’s what we look at today as we see Joshua urging the people of Israel to consider all that the Lord had done for them. As we do this, we’ll see why it is so important for us to always hold fast to the Lord for all he has done for us.

Under Joshua’s leadership Israel entered a new era. It was a time of rest and peace. Of course, Joshua knew it was never his doing all along. The Lord had done it all. This chapter starts by stating, “The Lord had given Israel rest from all her enemies.” Joshua himself had in fact been enjoying that rest. He had already been living the retired life in Canaan for around 20 years. Joshua knew he didn’t have much time left with the people of Israel in Canaan. He was over one hundred years old. So, he called together all the elders, judges, and leaders of the people. He wanted to give them an important reminder about all that had happened in the last thirty years. He wanted to remind them of how the Lord had fought for them to give them rest. “You yourselves have seen everything that the Lord your God has done for you.”

And none of the people couldn’t deny it! All the leaders had seen it. God had done so much for them to give them their rest. Joshua had been one of the scouts sent to explore the land almost sixty years earlier. Apart from Joshua and Caleb all the other scouts had said it would be impossible for them to take possession of the land. The land had been full of powerful and fortified cities. But that was no problem for the Lord. (Some might argue it wasn’t fair of the Lord to give the Israelites the land that belonged to others first. But the Lord had spoken of the judgment that the people in Canaan deserved for their evil practices for over six hundred years. Abraham’s offspring knew the time had come. And when the Israelites finally crossed into the land of the Canaanite people, the jig was up.) We can read about some of the most prominent accounts in Bible history taking place for Israel during Joshua’s time. The Lord was fighting for them from day one. The people entered the land as the Lord made the waters of the Jordan river separate. They walked into Canaan on dry ground because the Lord was going to do everything for them just as he promised. Then powerful fortified cities like Jericho came crumbling down, not by the power of war-machines, but by the Lord’s miraculous working for the people of Israel. We even read that during one battle the Lord made the sun stand still in the sky so that the people of Israel could win. Joshua was certainly right. It was unmistakably true. The Lord had fought for Israel. And these leaders gathered before him had seen it with their own eyes. The land they now lived in wasn’t cultivated or built up by them. They didn’t have to dig the wells or prepare the cities. They just took possession of it as the Lord placed it in their hands. And for the past few years they had enjoyed rest in their new home. They were like children sitting down at the dinner table about to enjoy a meal they did not prepare or work for. It was all handed right into their lap from the Lord.

Joshua wanted to point out God’s gift of rest so that they would hold fast to the Lord. “You must be very resolute in carrying out all that is written in the Book of the Law of Moses by not turning from it to the right or to the left, by not intermingling with these nations that remain with you. Do not ever call on or swear by the names of their gods. Never serve them and never bow down to them. But hold fast to the LORD your God, just as you have been doing to this day. ... for your own sakes, be very careful to love the LORD your God.” He gave them a seven-fold warning against taking the Lord for granted and spurning his gifts. “Carry out all his Word, don’t turn aside from his Word, don’t intermingle with spiritual darkness, don’t call upon or use the name of the false gods around you. Don’t serve or worship them.”

We might look at Joshua’s extensive warning against turning aside from the Lord and think, “Why would they ever stop trusting and loving the Lord their God? He had given them everything. They saw it with their own eyes!” That was true, but that didn’t make any difference when Joshua was young. He had witnessed an entire generation of people who walked away from slavery in Egypt and saw Israel’s slave-drivers destroyed under the ten plagues. He had seen those same people cross the waters into freedom only to then turn aside from the Lord repeatedly. They saw the goodness of God, but they turned aside from him.

My wife and I have lived in ten different neighborhoods since we got married. One of our past neighbors experienced how someone can turn aside from another who does everything for them. He spent the longest time on a project to add on to his house. As the project unfolded you could see how much he loved his wife. He had built for her an amazing addition that offered incredible views. He had spent so many hours on that project to make her happy and comfortable. But, sadly, she didn’t stick around with him to enjoy it. She left him. He had done all the work to make her happy. But she took it all for granted and spurned his efforts. Such things happen because the human heart easily takes for granted love that is freely given.

Joshua warned Israel's leaders because he had seen what the human heart could do. We're not only capable of spurning a delicious home-cooked meal or spurning devoted love with home improvement projects, we can spurn all the goodness of the Lord God. Joshua had to remind the people of the Lord's goodness and warn them of spurning his goodness.

Each one of us can also end up taking for granted God's goodness. Many Christians have been told of all that the Lord has done for them but did not hold fast to it. How about you? Joshua told the people to "hold fast" the Lord. It is a word that means to "stick to or cling to." It's such a picture of closeness that God uses this Word when describing his institution of marriage. He is like a husband to his bride, the Church. And he calls on us to stick close to him always.

When it comes to carrying out his Word are you holding fast or holding loosely? There might be parts of his Word that you might tell yourself "I can turn a little to the right or a little to the left. It won't really matter that much, will it? And in doing so you begin to cease to hold fast to the Lord as you loosen your grip on his Word. Joshua warned against intermingling with the unbelieving people around them. It's not wrong to live among and befriend people. But do you choose to bring into your life and home those who reject the Lord? Does a young person who decides they want to date or marry an unbeliever choose to hold fast to the Lord or hold fast to that person? We may not be calling upon the name of false gods or swearing by them, but do we start to acknowledge that our source of goodness includes things like money or entertainment when we value them and trust in them above the Lord our God? We may not be serving or worshiping false idols, but does your life show that you serve and idolize wealth? Are you holding fast to the Lord if it is clear you're spending most of your time concerned about beauty and comfort instead of his gift of true beauty and peace?

Whenever we fail to hold fast to the Lord, we can end up tossing aside his gracious gifts in exchange for something else that is worthless in comparison. Many of the people of Israel spurned God's gift of water, bread from heaven, and even a perfect place to live. They ended up dying in the wilderness. Many of them died under his judgment because of their unbelief. When you toss aside the gift of God for lesser things, you toss aside the greatest gift you've ever been given.

We need the same reminders and warnings given to the people of Israel. And that begins with the beautiful reminder of all that the Lord has done for us. He has fought for us to give us the gift of rest. All that God did for the people of Israel was to serve as a picture of all that he does for all of us. Just as he gave Israel promises of rest, he has given that promise to us. We read about that promised rest earlier in Hebrews chapter 4. We enter that rest through faith in him. It is a rest that he has earned for us.

Joshua's name meant "the Lord is salvation." We are familiar with the Greek way of spelling his name "Jesus." Through Jesus God has given us his promised rest from all our enemies. We crossed through the waters in our baptism and marched forward into a new life. It is a new life under God's care and his promises. And we don't fight our enemies by our own strength. The Lord fights for us. He crushed the devil (as we saw last week) underfoot and won the victory for us. He took the curse of sin and the sting of death and won over it for us. He walked in the flesh to fight this battle in our place. And by his death he won the victory over all our enemies forever.

Joshua included the reminder that God would continue to fight for his people and would continue to fulfill everything promised. That is our reminder too as we know God has so much more rest in store for us as his own. Jesus rose to life in victory and promised us that we will enter his promised rest. It won't be for a few years of retirement in a rich land. It will be for all eternity in his perfect kingdom. He will raise our bodies to live a hundred years as if it were only a day. With eternal joy we will forever be at peace and at rest with him. Until then we live under his protection and with the peace that comes from his love.

The people who listened to Joshua on this important occasion did heed his words. The generation who stood before Joshua served the Lord and listened to his Word. They held fast to the Lord their God. They carried out all the things written in his Word. They didn't swerve from his Word to the right or the left. They didn't call upon or swear by the idols around them. They only worshiped the Lord and served him. They did that because they had seen all that the Lord had done for them and they trusted in him to fulfill every promise.

They are one of the few generations in all the pages of Scripture who are credited with doing this. But their children, we are told, did not hold fast to the Lord. They broke everything that Joshua had warned against in his seven-fold warning. Hold fast in faith as you trust in the Lord and rely on him for his promised rest. That begins by repeating to each generation what Joshua did "The Lord himself has fought for you," (to give you his rest). He has fought for you and he will continue to fight for you until your rest is fully found.

So today, God still repeats this truth in his Word for you. He does it for each generation. You yourselves know and have heard all that the Lord has done for you. He has done all this for you to give you rest and to make you his own. He holds fast to you in love. Carry out all his Word, don't turn aside from his Word, don't intermingle with spiritual darkness, don't call upon or use the name of the false gods around you. Don't serve or worship them. Soon the dinner bell will ring, and you will join in his eternal wedding feast. Hold fast to the Lord who has fought for you to give you rest.