

CHAPTER 23

In this and the following chapter we have two farewell sermons, which Joshua preached to the people of Israel a little before his death. Had he designed to gratify the curiosity of succeeding ages, he would rather have recorded the method of Israel's settlement in their new conquests, their husbandry, manufacturers, trade, customs, courts of justice, and the constitutions of their infant commonwealth, which one would wish to be informed of; but that which he intended in the registers of this book was to entail on posterity a sense of religion and their duty to God; and therefore, overlooking these things which are the usual subjects of a common history, he here transmits to his reader the methods he took to persuade Israel to be faithful to their covenant with their God, which might have a good influence on the generations to come who should read those reasonings, as we may hope they had on that generation which then heard them. In this chapter we have,

I. A convention of the states called (v. 1, 2), probably to consult about the common concerns of their land, and to set in order that which, after some years' trial, being left to their prudence, was found wanting.

II. Joshua's speech to them as the opening, or perhaps at the concluding, of the sessions, to hear which was the principal design of their coming together. In it,

- 1.** Joshua reminds them of what God had done for them (v. 3, 4, 9, 14), and what he was ready to do yet further (v. 5, 10).
- 2.** He exhorts them carefully and resolutely to persevere in their duty to God (v. 6, 8, 11).

III. He cautions them against all familiarity with their idolatrous neighbours (v. 7).

IV. He gives them fair warning of the fatal consequences of it, if they should revolt from God and turn to idols (v. 12, 13, 15, 16). In all this he showed himself zealous for his God, and jealous over Israel with a godly jealousy.

<620> JOSHUA 23:1-10

JOSHUA'S CHARGE TO ISRAEL

As to the date of this edict of Joshua,

I. No mention at all is made of the place where this general assembly was held; some think it was at Timnath-serah, Joshua's own city, where he lived, and whence, being old, he could not well remove. But it does not appear that he took so much state upon him; therefore it is more probable this meeting was at Shiloh, where the tabernacle of meeting was, and to which place, perhaps, all the males that could had now come up to worship before the Lord, at one of the three great feasts, which Joshua took the opportunity of, for the delivering of this charge to them.

II. There is only a general mention of the time when this was done. It was *long after the Lord had given them rest*, but it is not said how long, v. 1. It was,

1. So long as that Israel had time to feel the comforts of their rest and possessions in Canaan, and to enjoy the advantages of that good land.

2. So long as that Joshua had time to observe which ways their danger lay of being corrupted, namely, by their intimacy with the Canaanites that remained, against which he is therefore careful to arm them.

III. The persons to whom Joshua made this speech: *To all Israel, even their elders, etc.* So it might be read, v. 2. They could not all come within hearing, but he called for all the elders, that is, the privy-counsellors, which in later times constituted the great Sanhedrim, the heads of the tribes, that is, the noblemen and gentlemen of their respective countries, the judges learned in the laws, that tried criminals and causes, and gave judgment upon them, and, *lastly*, the officers or sheriffs, who were entrusted with the execution of those judgments. These Joshua called together, and to them he addressed himself, 1. That they might communicate what he said, or at least the sense and substance of it, to those under them in their respective countries, and so this charge might be dispersed through the whole nation.

2. Because, if they would be prevailed upon to serve God and cleave to him, they, by their influence on the common people, would keep them faithful. If great men be good men, they will help to make many good.

IV. Joshua's circumstances when he gave them this charge: He *was old and stricken in age* (v. 1), probably it was in the last year of his life, and he lived to be 110 years old, ^{<623>}Joshua 24:29. And he himself takes notice of it, in the first words of his discourse, v. 2. When he began to be old, some years ago, God reminded him of it (^{<631>}Joshua 13:1): *Thou art old*. But now he did himself feel so much of the decays of age that he needed not to be told of it, he readily speaks of it himself: *I am old and stricken in age*. He uses it,

1. As an argument with himself to give them this charge, because being old he could expect to be but a little while with them, to advise and instruct them, and therefore (as Peter speaks, ^{<613>}2 Peter 1:13) *as long as he is in this tabernacle* he will take all opportunities to *put them in remembrance* of their duty, knowing by the increasing infirmities of age that he must shortly put off this tabernacle, and desiring that after his decease they might continue as good as they were now. When we see death hastening towards us, this should quicken us to do the work of life with all our might.

2. As an argument with them to give heed to what he said. he was old and experienced, and therefore to be the more regarded, for days should speak; he had grown old in their service, and had spent himself for their good, and therefore was to be the more regarded by them. He was old and dying; they would not have him long to preach to them; therefore let them observe what he said now, and lay it up in store for the time to come.

V. The discourse itself, the scope of which is to engage them if possible, them and their seed after them, to persevere in the true faith and worship of the God of Israel.

1. He puts them in mind of the great things God had done for them, now in his days, and under his administration, for here he goes no further back. And for the proof of this he appeals to their own eyes (v. 3): "*You have seen all that the Lord your God has done*; not what I have done, or what you have done (we were only instruments in God's hand), but what God himself has done by me and for you."

(1.) Many great and mighty nations (as the rate of nations then went) were driven out from as fine a country as any was at that time upon the face of the earth, to make room for Israel. “You see *what he has done to these nations*, who were his creatures, the work of his hands, and whom he could have made new creatures and fit for his service; yet see what destruction he has made of them *because of you* (v. 2), how he has *driven them out from before you* (v. 9), as if they were of no account with him, though great and strong in comparison with you.”

(2.) They were not only driven out (this they might have been, and yet sent to some other country less rich to begin a new plantation there, suppose to that wilderness in which Israel had wandered so long, and so they would only have exchanged seats with them), but they were trodden down before them; though they held out against them with the greatest obstinacy that could be, yet they were subdued before them, which made the possessing of their land so much the more glorious to Israel and so much the more illustrious an instance of the power and goodness of the God of Israel (v. 3): “*The Lord your God* has not only led you, and fed you, and kept you, but he has fought for you as a man of war,” by which title he was known among them when he first brought them out of Egypt, ^{<DISB>}Exodus 15:3. So clear and cheap were all their victories, during the course of this long war, that *no man had been able to stand before them* (v. 9), that is, to make head against them, so as to put them in fear, create them any difficulty, or give any check to the progress of their victorious arms. In every battle they carried the day, and in every siege they carried the city; their loss before Ai was upon a particular occasion, was inconsiderable, and only served to show them on what terms they stood with God; but, otherwise, never was army crowned with such a constant uninterrupted series of successes as the armies of Israel were in the wars of Canaan.

(3.) They had not only conquered the Canaanites, but were put in full possession of their land (v. 4): “*I have divided to you by lot these nations*, both those which are cut off and those which remain, not only that you may spoil and plunder them, and live at discretion in their country for a time, but to be a sure and lasting inheritance for your tribes. You have it not only under your feet, but in your hands.”

2. He assures them of God's readiness to carry on and complete this glorious work in due time. It is true some of the Canaanites did yet remain, and in some places were strong and daring, but this should be no

disappointment to their expectations; when Israel was so multiplied as to be able to replenish this land God would expel the Canaanites to the last man, provided Israel would pursue their advantages and carry on the war against them with vigour (v. 5): “*The Lord your God will drive them from out of your sight*, so that there shall not be a Canaanite to be seen in the land; and even that part of the country which is yet in their hands you shall possess.” If it were objected that the men of war of the several tribes being dispersed to their respective countries, and the army disbanded, it would be difficult to get them together when there was occasion to renew the war upon the remainder of the Canaanites, in answer to this he tells them what little need they had to be in care about the numbers of their forces (v. 10): *One man of you shall chase a thousand*, as Jonathan did, ^{<01413>}1 Samuel 14:13. “Each tribe may venture for itself, and for the recovery of its own lot, without fearing disadvantage by the disproportion of numbers; for the Lord your God, whose all power is, both to inspirit and to dispirit, and who has all the creatures at his beck, *he it is that fighteth for you*; and how many do you reckon him for?”

3. He hereupon most earnestly charges them to adhere to their duty, to go on and persevere in the good ways of the Lord wherein they had so well set out. He exhorts them,

(1.) To be very courageous (v. 6): “God fighteth for you against your enemies, do you therefore *behave yourselves valiantly* for him. Keep and do with a firm resolution *all that is written in the book of the law*.” He presses upon them no more than what they were already bound to. “Keep with care, do with diligence, and eye what is written with sincerity.”

(2.) To be very cautious: “Take heed of missing it, either on the right hand or on the left, for there are errors and extremes on both hands. Take heed of running either into a profane neglect of any of God’s institutions or into a superstitious addition of any of your own inventions.” They must especially take heed of all approaches towards idolatry, the sin to which they were first inclined and would be most tempted, v. 7.

[1.] They must not acquaint themselves with idolaters, nor come among them to visit them or be present at any of their feasts or entertainments, for they could not contract any intimacy nor keep up any conversation with them, without danger of infection.

[2.] They must not show the least respect to any idol, nor *make mention of the name of their gods*, but endeavour to bury the remembrance of them in perpetual oblivion, that the worship of them may never be revived. “Let the very name of them be forgotten. Look upon idols as filthy detestable things, not to be named without the utmost loathing and detestation.” The Jews would not suffer their children to name swine's flesh, because it was forbidden, lest the name of it should occasion their desiring it; but, if they had occasion to speak of it, they must call it *that strange thing*. It is a pity that among Christians the names of the heathen gods are so commonly used, and made so familiar as they are, especially in plays and poems: let those names which have been set up in rivalship with God be for ever loathed and lost.

[3.] They must not countenance others in showing respect to them. They must not only not swear by them themselves, but they must not cause others to swear by them, which supposes that they must not make any covenants with idolaters, because they, in the confirming of their covenants, would swear by their idols; never let Israelites admit such an oath.

[4.] They must take heed of these occasions of idolatry, lest by degrees they should arrive at the highest step of it, which was serving false gods, and bowing down to them, against the letter of the second commandment.

(3.) To be very constant (v. 8): *Cleave unto the Lord your God*, that is, “delight in him, depend upon him, devote yourselves to his glory, and continue to do so to the end, *as you have done unto this day*, ever since you came to Canaan;” for, being willing to make the best of them, he looks not so far back as the iniquity of Peor. There might be many things amiss among them, but they had not forsaken the Lord their God, and it is in order to insinuate his exhortation to perseverance with the more pleasing power that he praises them. “Go on and prosper, for the Lord is with you while you are with him.” Those that command should commend; the way to make people better is to make the best of them. “You have cleaved to the Lord unto this day, therefore go on to do so, else you lose the praise and recompence of what you have wrought. Your righteousness will not be mentioned unto you if you turn from it.”

⌞1231⌟ JOSHUA 23:11-16

JOSHUA'S CHARGE TO ISRAEL

Here,

I. Joshua directs them what to do, that they might persevere in religion, v. 11. Would we cleave to the Lord, and not forsake him,

1. We must always stand upon our guard, for many a precious soul is lost and ruined through carelessness: “Take heed therefore, *take good heed to yourselves*, to your *souls* (so the word is), that the inward man be kept clean from the pollutions of sin, and closely employed in the service of God.” God has given us precious souls with this charge, “Take good heed to them, keep them with all diligence, above all keepings.”

2. What we do in religion we must do from a principle of love, not by constraint or from a slavish fear of God, but of choice and with delight. “*Lord the Lord your God*, and you will not leave him.”

II. He urges God's fidelity to them as an argument why they should be faithful to him (v. 14): “*I am going the way of all the earth*, I am old and dying.” To die is to go a journey, a journey to our long home; it is the way of all the earth, the way that all mankind must go, sooner or later. Joshua himself, though so great and good a man, and one that could so ill be spared, cannot be exempted from this common lot. He takes notice of it here that they might look upon these as his dying words, and regard them accordingly. Or thus: “*I am dying*, and leaving you. *Me you have not always*; but if you cleave to the Lord he will never leave you.” Or thus, “Now that I am near my end it is proper to look back upon the years that are past; and, in the review, I find, and you *yourselves know it in all your hearts and in all your souls*, by a full conviction on the clearest evidence, and the thing has made an impression upon you” — (that knowledge does us good which is seated, not in the head only, but in the heart and soul, and with which we are duly affected) — “you know that *not one thing hath failed of all the good things which the Lord spoke concerning you*” (and he spoke a great many); see ⌞12145⌟ Joshua 21:45. God had promised them victory, rest, plenty, his tabernacle among them, etc., and *not one thing had failed* of all he had promised. “Now,” said he, “has God been thus true

to you? Be not you false to him.” It is the apostle's argument for perseverance (⁸⁰²³Hebrews 10:23), *He is faithful that has promised.*

III. He gives them fair warning what would be the fatal consequences of apostasy (v. 12, 13, 15, 16): “If you go back, know for a certainty it will be your ruin.” Observe,

1. How he describes the apostasy which he warns them against. The steps of it would be (v. 12) growing intimate with idolaters, who would craftily wheedle them, and insinuate themselves into their acquaintance, now that they had become lords of the country, to serve their own ends. The next step would be intermarrying with them, drawn to it by their artifices, who would be glad to bestow their children upon these wealthy Israelites. And the consequence of that would be (v. 16) *servng other gods* (which were pretended to be the ancient deities of the country) and bowing down to them. Thus the way of sin is down-hill, and those who have fellowship with sinners cannot avoid having fellowship with sin. This he represents,

(1.) As a base and shameful desertion; “it is going back from what you have so well begun,” 5:12.

(2.) As a most perfidious breach of promise (v. 16): “It is a transgression of *the covenant of the Lord your God, which he commanded you, and which you yourselves set your hand to.*” Other sins were transgressions of the law God commanded them, but this was a transgression of the covenant he commanded them, and amounted to a breach of the relation between God and them and a forfeiture of all the benefits of the covenant.

2. How he describes the destruction which he warns them of. He tells them,

(1.) That these remainders of the Canaanites, if they should harbour them, and indulge them, and join in affinity with them, would be snares and traps to them, both to draw them to sin (not only to idolatry, but to all immoralities, which would be the ruin, not only of their virtue, but of their wisdom and sense, their spirit and honour), and also to draw them into foolish bargains, unprofitable projects, and all manner of inconveniences; and having thus by underhand practices decoyed them into one mischief or other, so as to gain advantages against them, they would then act more openly, and be *scourges in their sides* and *thorns in their eyes*, would perhaps kill or drive away their cattle, burn or steal their corn, alarm or

plunder their houses, and would be all ways possible be vexatious to them; for, whatever pretences of friendship they might make, a Canaanite, unless proselyted to the faith and worship of the true God, would in every age hate the very name and sight of an Israelite. See how the punishment would be made to answer the sin, nay, how the sin itself would be the punishment.

(2.) That the anger of the Lord would be kindled against them. Their making leagues with the Canaanites would not only give those idolaters the opportunity of doing them a mischief, and be the fostering of snakes in their bosoms, but it would likewise provoke God to become their enemy, and would kindle the fire of his displeasure against them.

(3.) That all the threatenings of the word would be fulfilled, as the promise had been, for the God of eternal truth is faithful to both (v. 15): “*As all good things have come upon you according to the promise, so long as you have kept close to God, so all evil things will come upon you according to the threatening, if you forsake him.*” Moses had *set before them good and evil*; they had experienced the good, and were now in the enjoyment of it, and the evil would as certainly come if they were disobedient. As God's promises are not a fool's paradise, so his threatenings are not bugbears.

(4.) That it would end in the utter ruin of their church and nation, as Moses had foretold. This is three times mentioned here. Your enemies will vex you *until you perish from off this good land*, v. 13. Again, “God will plague you *until he have destroyed you from off this good land*, v. 15. Heaven and earth will concur to root you out, so that (v. 16) *you shall perish from off the good land.*” It will aggravate their perdition that the land from which they shall perish is a good land, and a land which God himself had given them, and which therefore he would have secured to them if they by their wickedness had not thrown themselves out of it. Thus the goodness of the heavenly Canaan, and the free and sure grant God has made of it, will aggravate the misery of those that shall for ever be shut out and perish from it. Nothing will make them see how wretched they are so much as to see how happy they might have been. Joshua thus sets before them the fatal consequences of their apostasy, that, *knowing the terror of the Lord*, they might be persuaded *with purpose of heart to cleave to him*.