

God Is Faithful!



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Josh. 21:43–45; 2 Tim. 2:11–13; Joshua 23; Rev. 14:10, 19; Deut. 6:5.*

Memory Text: “Not one word of all the good promises that the LORD had made to the house of Israel had failed; all came to pass” (*Joshua 21:45, ESV*).

When John F. Kennedy addressed the United States at his inauguration, on January 20, 1961, his speech was only 1,366 words, but it left an indelible mark on the American mind. As he encouraged his country to focus on their responsibilities instead of their privileges, he said: “With a good conscience our only sure reward, with history the final judge of our deeds, let us go forth to lead the land we love, asking His blessing and His help, but knowing that here on earth God’s work must truly be our own.”

As Joshua, the aging leader of the Israelites, sensed that he was nearing the end of his life, he decided to address the leaders of the nation and the Israelites (*Joshua 23 and 24*). Joshua 23 is focused more on the future and on how to worship God—exclusively. Joshua 24 reviews God’s faithful acts in the past, with the purpose to prompt a decision concerning who alone deserves to be worshiped: Yahweh.

This week, we will study together the first speech of Joshua, in which he glances back at the victories of Israel but at the same time traces the path of future success for Israel.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, December 20.

All Came to Pass

In Joshua 21:43–45, what picture does the book paint of God? How do these words apply not only to the historical Promised Land but also to the reality of our salvation (2 Tim. 2:11–13)?

These verses constitute the climax of the book and its theological summary. They highlight one of the major themes of the whole book: the covenant faithfulness of Yahweh, who keeps His promises and fulfills His oaths. This short section also summarizes the entire content of the book so far. Joshua 21:43 speaks of the allocation and settlement of the land (*Joshua 13–21*), while Joshua 21:44 refers to victories won over the enemies and control gained over the land (*Joshua 1–12*). All this retrospective is viewed through the prism of God’s faithfulness. The Israelites must always remember that they can never claim the victories over their enemies or the land as their inheritance—except through God’s loyalty to His given word.

He gave “all the land” (*Josh. 21:43, NKJV, emphasis supplied*), delivered “all their enemies into their hand” (*Josh. 21:44, NKJV, emphasis supplied*), and according to “all that He had sworn” (*Josh. 21:44, NKJV, emphasis supplied*), “all came to pass” (*Josh. 21:45, NKJV, emphasis supplied*). The repeated use of the word *kol*, “all,” six times in three verses (*Josh. 21:43–45*), emphasizes once again the truth that the land is the gift of Yahweh, and Israel can take no credit for receiving it. It was the Lord who swore to “give” the land and who “had given” their enemies into their hands.

All Israel’s success has to be attributed solely to God’s divine initiative and trustworthiness. This is equally true concerning our salvation: “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast” (*Eph. 2:8, 9, ESV*).

Indeed, emphasizing God’s faithfulness, Paul also wrote: “The saying is trustworthy, for: If we have died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him; if we deny him, he also will deny us; if we are faithless, he remains faithful—for he cannot deny himself” (2 Tim. 2:11–13, *ESV*).

How does God’s faithfulness in keeping His promises give us confidence that none of His promises for the future will fail? (See 1 Cor. 10:13 and 2 Cor. 1:18–20.)

A Sign of Concern

The glorious conclusion of the whole section (*Josh. 21:43–45*) carries within it the fulfilled condition of obedience. Success is never to be taken for granted; it is always linked to obedience to God’s Word. Thus, the allotment of the land, besides being the token of God’s faithfulness to Israel (*Neh. 9:8*), creates space for an open-ended future development based on Israel’s attitude. Will Israel be able to secure what has been achieved?

Read Joshua 23:1–5. What are the major focal points of Joshua’s introduction?

Joshua’s speech moves from the old and aged speaker (emphasized twice) to the audience who will have to carry on the mission entrusted to them by God. He describes how the conquest of the land was possible: the Lord fought for them. Even though, because of their unfaithfulness and disbelief, the Israelites had to be involved in warfare after the Exodus, it was not through their military power but through God’s intervention that they managed to possess the land.

God has given rest to Israel from its enemies, but there are some nations left that still have to be dispossessed. Victory is not an accomplished, unchangeable reality for Israel but an ever-present possibility by constant reliance in faithfulness on God’s available help.

What are the similarities between how the Israelites conquered Canaan under Joshua’s leadership and the way Christians today can live a victorious spiritual life? (Read *Josh. 23:10*, *Col. 2:15*, *2 Cor. 10:3–5*, and *Eph. 6:11–18*.)

The victories of the Israelites could not be attributed to their strength and strategy. Similarly, spiritual victory over sin and temptation have been secured through the sacrifice and resurrection of Jesus Christ, but God’s people today must constantly rely on the spiritual supplies provided by the Holy Spirit in order to live a triumphant life.

With so many wonderful promises before us, why do we still find it so easy to sin?

Clear Boundaries

Using the same words that were addressed to him at the beginning of the book (*Josh. 1:7, 8*), Joshua states that the task that lay ahead of Israel is not primarily military in nature. It is spiritual. It has to do with obedience to God's revealed will in the Torah.

Why do you think Joshua took such a strong position concerning Israel's relations with the surrounding nations (*Josh. 23:6–8, 12, 13*)?

The danger facing Israel is not the threat of the remaining nations' animosity but the risk of their friendship. Their weapons might not represent any challenge to Israel; however, their ideology and values (or counter-values) could prove to be more harmful than any military force. Joshua draws the attention of the leaders to the crucial fact that the conflict they have been involved in is first, and ultimately, spiritual. Therefore, Israel has to maintain its unique identity.

The prohibition of invoking the name of a god, swearing by it, and serving or bowing to it has to do with idolatry. In the ancient Near East, the name of a deity represented his or her presence and power. Invoking or mentioning the names of foreign gods in everyday greetings or business transactions meant recognizing their authority and helped lead the Israelites to seek their power in time of need (*compare with Judg. 2:1–3, 11–13*).

The danger of intermarriage with the remaining Canaanites consisted in losing Israel's spiritual purity. The intent of Joshua's admonition is not to promote racial or ethnic purity but rather to avoid idolatry, which can lead to the spiritual collapse of Israel. The case of Solomon is a dramatic example of the sad spiritual consequences of intermarriage (*1 Kings 3:1, 1 Kings 11:1–8*); in the New Testament, Christians are openly warned against seeking marital relationships with nonbelievers (*2 Cor. 6:14*), although, in the case of existing marriages, Paul does not advise divorce from the unbelieving spouse but calls them to live an exemplary Christian life in hope of winning the spouse to the Lord (*1 Cor. 7:12–16*).

Joshua's warning against harmful associations inevitably leads to the question of the Christian's relationship to the "world." How can we find a balanced relationship with the society that surrounds us?

The Anger of the Lord

How should we interpret the descriptions of God's wrath and retributive justice in Joshua (*Josh. 23:15, 16*) and elsewhere in Scripture? (See also *Num. 11:33; 2 Chron. 36:16; Rev. 14:10, 19; Rev. 15:1.*)

Israel already has experienced the Lord's anger during the wilderness wanderings (*Num. 11:33, Num. 12:9*) as well as in the Promised Land (*Josh. 7:1*) and was fully aware of the consequences of provoking Yahweh's anger by flagrantly breaking the covenant. These verses represent the climax of the severity of Joshua's rhetoric. It is shocking to hear that the Lord will destroy Israel, as the same term has been previously used to refer to the annihilation of the Canaanites. As surely as the promises of the Lord have been faithfully fulfilled concerning Israel's blessing, the curses of the covenant (*Leviticus 26, Deuteronomy 28*) also will become true if the Israelites reject the covenant. In light of the dispossession and destruction of the Canaanites, these verses demonstrate once again that Yahweh is ultimately the judge of all the earth. He declares war against sin, irrespective of where it is found. Israel was not sanctified, and did not acquire special merits, through participation in holy war any more than pagan nations did when they later became the means of Yahweh's judgment against the chosen nation.

It lies within Israel's power of choice to make the glorious certainties of the past the foundation for facing the future.

At first glance, the biblical teaching on God's anger seems to be incompatible with the affirmation that God is love (*John 3:16, 1 John 4:8*). Yet, it is exactly in the light of God's wrath that the biblical doctrine of God's love becomes even more relevant. First, the Bible presents God as loving, patient, long-suffering, and ready to forgive (*Exod. 34:6, Mic. 7:18*). However, in the context of a world affected by sin, the wrath of the Lord is the attitude of His holiness and righteousness when confronted by sin and evil. His wrath is never an emotional, revengeful, unpredictable overreaction. The New Testament teaches that Christ became sin for us (*2 Cor. 5:21*), and through His death we have been reconciled with God (*Rom. 5:10*). Whoever believes in Him will not have to face God's wrath (*John 3:36, Eph. 2:3, 1 Thess. 1:10*). The concept of the wrath of God presents God as the righteous judge of the universe and the One who upholds the cause of justice (*Ps. 7:11, Ps. 50:6, 2 Tim. 4:8*).

Cling to God

The only way Israel will be able to avoid the temptation of idolatry and the wrath of God is not by constantly remembering the “don’ts” of the covenant but by fostering a conscious and consistent allegiance to the Lord. The same verb, “to cleave, adhere” to the Lord (*see Deut. 4:4*), also is used to describe the marriage covenant that was intended between wife and husband (*Gen. 2:24*) or the loyalty of Ruth to Naomi (*Ruth 1:14*). It is important to note that, according to Joshua’s evaluation, such faithfulness has characterized Israel as a nation “to this day.” Unfortunately, the same assertion will not be true for later periods of Israel’s history, as the book of Judges sadly demonstrates (*Judg. 2:2, 7, 11; Judg. 3:7, 12; Judg. 4:1, etc.*).

Joshua appeals to Israel to love the Lord their God (*Josh. 23:11; compare with Deut. 6:5*). **Love cannot be forced; otherwise, it will cease to be what it essentially is. Yet, in what sense can love be commanded?**

In order for the Israelites to continually enjoy the blessings of the covenant, they will have to stay loyal to God. The Hebrew is extremely emphatic: “Be very careful for the sake of your own soul.” The word *’ahabah*, “love,” can refer to a wide range of human affections, including friendly attachment, sexual intimacy, maternal tenderness, romantic love, and loyalty to God. If we understand love for God as a conscious commitment and devotion to Him, it can be enjoined without violating its true nature (*compare with John 13:34*). God always intended that obedience to His commands should spring from a personal relationship with Him (“*I . . . brought you to Myself*” [*Exod. 19:4, NKJV*]; *Deut. 6:5; compare with Matt. 22:37*) based on what He has done for them in His great mercy and love.

The command to love God also expresses the mutual, but not symmetrical, nature of divine love. God desires to enter into an intimate, personal relationship with every person who reciprocates His love. Thus, His universal love to all constitutes the framework for the manifestation of our voluntary, mutual love.

Jesus gave a new commandment to His disciples. In what sense was this commandment new and old at the same time? (Read *John 13:34, John 15:17, and 1 John 3:11; compare with Lev. 19:18.*)

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “The Last Words of Joshua,” pp. 521, 522, in *Patriarchs and Prophets*.

“Satan deceives many with the plausible theory that God’s love for His people is so great that He will excuse sin in them; he represents that while the threatenings of God’s word are to serve a certain purpose in His moral government, they are never to be literally fulfilled. But in all His dealings with His creatures God has maintained the principles of righteousness by revealing sin in its true character—by demonstrating that its sure result is misery and death. The unconditional pardon of sin never has been, and never will be. Such pardon would show the abandonment of the principles of righteousness, which are the very foundation of the government of God. It would fill the unfallen universe with consternation. God has faithfully pointed out the results of sin, and if these warnings were not true, how could we be sure that His promises would be fulfilled? That so-called benevolence which would set aside justice is not benevolence but weakness.

“God is the life-giver. From the beginning all His laws were ordained to life. But sin broke in upon the order that God had established, and discord followed. So long as sin exists, suffering and death are inevitable. It is only because the Redeemer has borne the curse of sin in our behalf that man can hope to escape, in his own person, its dire results.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 522.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Review the evidence of God’s faithfulness in your life. What can you point to? At the same time, how do you respond when things haven’t gone as you have hoped or prayed for, or when claimed promises are met with silence?
- 2 Discuss the biblical teaching about God’s anger. How would you present the wrath of the Lord as part of the good news?
- 3 What principles can you gather from this week’s lesson regarding association with unbelievers? How can we balance having clear boundaries in terms of our principles and practices while mingling with people to serve them and to look out for their well-being?
- 4 What are some of the obstacles that prevent you from clinging to the Lord with all your heart?

“Tell Us About the Bible”

The woman didn't want any help when Kim Sun arrived at her house at the regularly scheduled time.

“Why?” asked Sun, a South Korean serving as a missionary in her remote town in the Philippines. “Did I do something wrong?”

“No, no,” the woman replied. “I want you to take a break. You'll have more people to help around the neighborhood this afternoon. Here, have some cookies and relax.”

Sun was touched by the woman's concern. He had been helping people free of charge since arriving in the town three months earlier. Rather than tell people that he was a missionary, Sun had sought to be their friend and show God's love. For three months, the townspeople had accepted his help without any thought about him. But now, this woman was expressing care for his well-being. He realized that he had made a first real friend.

But she wasn't the last. Around the same time, many townspeople began to view Sun as their friend, and they piled him with questions.

“Why are you helping us for free?” said one.

“Where are you from?” said another.

Sun replied that he came from the 1000 Missionary Movement.

“I'm a missionary,” he said. “I want you to know Jesus Christ, so I have been serving you.”

The townspeople were astonished to hear that Sun was a missionary and said, “If you are a missionary, then why don't you tell us about the Bible?”

“Do you want to study the Bible?” Sun said.

“Yes! Yes!” they replied.

Before long, no one wanted Sun's help anymore. Everyone was studying the Bible with Sun. A few people didn't request Bible studies, but they agreed when Sun invited them. After three months of free labor, how could they refuse?

Sun remembered the mistake he made with his parents. As a new Adventist, he had sought to convince his parents to embrace his beliefs for five years and failed miserably. Now, he presented each Bible truth as an expression of God's love.



He shared the Genesis story of creation. “This is God's love for you,” he said. He read the parables of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son. “This is God's love for you,” he said. He spoke about Jesus dying on the cross. “This is God's love for you,” he said.

Kim Sun is associate director of the 1000 Missionary Movement, whose headquarters in Silang, Philippines, were constructed with the help of a 1996 Thirteenth Sabbath Offering. Read the rest of the story next week.