

# **Bible Studies for Life Series for September 24: Passing on the baton of leadership**

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## **Passing on the baton of leadership**

• Joshua 24:14-28,31

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This week's lesson concludes the series dealing with Joshua and leadership. The lesson draws together and revisits several themes introduced in previous lessons and emphasizes the importance of helping others to lead.

The leadership theme in essence comes full circle as now the question "Who Me? A Leader?" transfers to the lips and minds of the next generation of God's people. The remembering of victories and defeats leads to the challenge to serve God.

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Joshua 24 focuses on the covenant renewal gathering at Shechem. The events relate closely to Joshua's farewell in chapter 23. There, Joshua "...summoned all Israel—their elders, leaders, judges and officials—and said to them, 'I am old and well advanced in years'" (v. 2).

Joshua proceeds to recount the immediate past history of the conquest and distribution of the land. Joshua emphasizes God's primary role in all that took place: "You yourselves have seen everything the Lord your God has done to all these nations for your sake; it was the Lord your God who fought for you" (v. 3).

Joshua recalls the essential words of encouragement Moses and God gave to him at the outset of his leadership journey: "Be very strong; be careful to obey all that is written in the book of the Law of Moses, without turning aside to the right or the left" (v. 6, compare Deuteronomy 31:6-13; Joshua 1:6-9).

Chapter 23 concludes with a reminder of the recent victories wrought by God on behalf of God's people: "The Lord has driven out before you great and powerful nations; to this day no one has been able to withstand you. One of you routs a thousand, because the Lord your God fights for you, just as he promised. So be very careful to love the Lord your God" (vv. 9-10). Joshua amplifies this call to love God with sobering reminders about the perils of violating God's covenant (23:12-16).

The subtle transition to chapter 24 suggests a separate gathering; however,

the flow and focus of the chapter closely parallel the presentation in chapter 23. Joshua summons together all the tribes of Israel (v. 1); he recounts the extended history of Israel (vv. 2-13); he places before all the people a challenge to serve God alone (vv. 14-27).

At least two important differences distinguish the farewell scene of chapter 23 from the covenant renewal gathering in chapter 24. First, Joshua's farewell in chapter 23 comes in the form of a "testament," a final word from Joshua to the people and their leaders. In chapter 24, the final words from Joshua come in the form of a dialogue between Joshua and the people—the difference between a final statement and a final conversation. The dialogical encounter increases the drama and suspense of the scene: Will the people respond positively to Joshua's challenge? What choice will the people make?

The scene calls to mind Moses' call to "choose life" (Deuteronomy 30:19). The people there at Shechem enter into this conversation with Joshua fully aware of consequences of poor choices.

Second, the history recounted in the opening of chapter 24 extends to the earliest memories of the people. Joshua recalls the call of Abraham, the miracle of Isaac, the struggle between Jacob and Esau, and the transfer from Egypt (vv. 2-4). Joshua succinctly brings to mind the role of Moses and Aaron in the exodus, the crossing of the Red Sea, and the flight from Egypt (vv. 5-6).

Joshua alludes powerfully to failure along the way with the terse turn of phrase, "Then you lived in the desert for a long time" (v. 6). Only then does Joshua turn to the more recent history of the conquest and occupation of the land (vv. 7-13).

While Joshua's testament, or final words of chapter 23 bring to a close the narrative begun in Joshua 1, the historical review and dialogue of chapter

24 bring to conclusion the longer history and struggle of God's people from the time of their beginning.

The focus on the conversation between Joshua and the people pushes the challenge to serve God beyond the boundaries of the historical event. Subsequent generations of God's people can and must respond to Joshua's challenge: "But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the river or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord" (v. 15).

The people's response to Joshua's challenge is instructive. Joshua dismisses their rather flippant initial agreement to serve God and suggests they will fail. The people protest, "...No! We will serve the Lord" (v. 21). Joshua capitulates, but reminds them, "You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen to serve the Lord" (v. 22).

The encounter betrays the persistent human tendency to underestimate the cost of following and serving God. It calls to mind the encounters between Jesus and his disciples when he presents to them the true cost of discipleship. Peter, who has a brief moment insight into the identity of Jesus, "You are the Christ," balks at the realization that he must serve a crucified messiah (Mark 8:27-33). All the disciples, who argue about who is the greatest without understanding, "If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all" (Mark 9:35). James and John, who want to be elevated to positions of honor and prestige, to positions of leadership, without understanding the true cost of "taking the cup" and "experiencing baptism" (Mark 10:35-40). Like the people before Joshua, they agree to something that they may not fully comprehend.

God's gracious challenge still comes to those who enter the waters of baptism without counting the cost, who take the cup and the bread without

considering the sacrifice, or who seek positions of leadership without understanding the nature of service. "Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve."

### **Discussion questions**

- What has following God cost you? Would the cost be greater or less if you followed him more closely?
- What things in your life prevent you from taking more of a leadership role in the body of Christ?
- How are you going about molding others to grow in their leadership capabilities?



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