

Living in Covenant: Joshua-Judges

I begin by reading this morning from Psalm 105, beginning with verse 42. “For he [that is, the Lord] remembered his holy promise given to his servant Abraham. He brought out his people with rejoicing, his chosen ones with shouts of joy.” That, of course, refers to God’s promise to Abraham and to the Exodus. Then God gave this people the lands of the nations, and they became heirs to what others had toiled for. We read in the books of Joshua and Judges that God gave them lands that had winepresses built, orchards planted, vineyards cultivated. God had the place all ready for them just like He had Eden ready for Adam and Eve. He gave this that they might keep His precepts and observe His laws. Praise the Lord!

Going into the land and inheriting it involved the concept of rest, which we will also be referring to in the course of the lecture. In Hebrews 4:1, we read:

Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it.

Now in Hebrews, the idea of rest is not just entering Canaan the first time, a second time or a third time. Picking up with verse 6:

It still remains that some will enter that rest, and those who formerly had the gospel preached to them did not go in, because of their disobedience. Therefore, God again set a certain day calling it Today, when a long time later he spoke through David, as was said before, “Today if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.” For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken later about another day. There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God.

Joshua was a rest-giver, but not the permanent rest-giver. There is one greater than Joshua, and there is a greater rest than entering a physical land and inheriting that physical land. Joshua had an important role in being a type and giving us an idea as to what it will be like to enter into the eternal Canaan, the everlasting Eden.

Let’s pray.

*God, as we look more closely at what You have revealed to us in the books of Joshua and Judges, we pray again that You will bless us. God, to ask that is, in a way, not necessary, but we do want to recognize that without Your blessing, we cannot proceed. You have promised and you have kept promises in times past and we know You will keep Your promises to us. Enlighten us. Give us an ever-increasing sense of how great You are as we look at what You have said and done in days gone by. Lord, be with those who are not with us here this morning. Bless them in whatever it is that detains them. Keep them. Bless us together here for Jesus’ sake, Amen.*

We have the books of Joshua and Judges before us today. I have titled this lecture “Living Covenantally.” Could the people under Joshua and under the Judges live as a covenant people? They could because God the sovereign Lord remained ever absolutely the Lord of heaven and earth, the God of the nations, the God of His people. They could because God kept covenant. There is no doubt about that. God kept His stipulations, but also kept His assurances and promises. God did not fail.

Could the people live covenantally? Yes, they could. They had an appointed mediator. God saw to it as they entered the land, there was one to lead them: Joshua the lesser serving in the place of Joshua the

greater. So we see that the people could live covenantally. They had a sovereign suzerain. They had the administrative means—the covenant. They had the leadership.

Let us look at this mediator, Joshua, the appointed one. The first chapter of Joshua refers to the fact that he had been prepared as Moses' aide. The translation there is "aide," but the word could be translated as "minister." Joshua had to minister in the sense of being a servant. We can use a variety of terms, but as an aide to Moses, he had been in charge of the people of Israel who went and fought the Amalekites, as we read in Exodus 17:9. Remember, as long as Moses kept his arms upraised, Joshua was able to lead the people in victory. Joshua learned a great lesson then about being a leader. He was one of the two spies who gave a favorable report. It is interesting that Joshua represents the tribe of Joseph. He was from the tribe of Ephraim, the younger of Joseph's two sons. Later on, there was always tension between Ephraim and Judah, but at this time Caleb, the other good spy, was from Judah, and Joshua represented the family of Rachel whereas Caleb represented the family of Leah. At this time, however, since Joshua represents the family of Rachel, it is not the family of Leah, the family of Judah, which comes to the fore now as a mediator and as a leader when it is time to go and possess the land.

Joshua was appointed and prepared. We saw in Numbers 27 that he was appointed as Moses' successor. Then in Deuteronomy 31, we also read that he had actually taken up that position before Moses died. After God had appointed Joshua, it is interesting to read, in Joshua 1:10, "And Joshua ordered the officers of the people: 'go through the camp....'" Joshua immediately took charge. He was speaking to the elders, the appointed subordinates who were nevertheless in charge, and as they went through the camp and gathered the people, the people answered Joshua, as we read in verse 16, "Whatever you have commanded us we will do, and wherever you send us, we will go. Just as we fully obeyed Moses, so we will obey you. Only may the LORD your God be with you as He was with Moses. Whoever rebels against your word and does not obey your words, whatever you may command them, will be put to death. And then they repeated what God had said twice, *chazaq ve'ematz*, "be strong and be steadfast and courageous." The people repeated what God had said. So the people accepted him; we never read that there was a rebellion against Joshua like there was against Moses. Joshua was appointed by God and the people responded and said, "Yes, we accept you, Joshua," but Joshua was confirmed as the mediator of God's covenant representing the LORD. We have that in verse 1 of chapter 1: "After the death of Moses the servant of the LORD, the LORD said to Joshua, son of Nun, Moses' aide...." God came to Joshua and spoke to him specifically and directly.

What had happened before in Numbers 27 and Deuteronomy 31 is now definitely confirmed by God. God gave the specific confirmation to Joshua. Joshua receives four assurances in this passage in Joshua 1:2-9. First, God says, "I will give the land as promised to Moses and Abraham." See how the covenant with Abraham ties in again. God remembered it when the children of Israel were in Egypt. Now, as the book of Joshua opens, God is keeping His promises given to Abraham, through Moses through the people, and now to Joshua. There is not a whole series of covenants. There is just one covenant that is reconfirmed, repeated, expanded, and applied. So the first assurance is that God is doing what he had said He would do. Secondly, there is the assurance of victory in verse 5: "No one will be able to stand up against you all the days of your life." What a blessed assurance—"No one will be able to stand up against you. You will be victorious. You will have victory. You will overcome."

The third assurance is the heart of the covenant promise: "I will be with you." The second part of verse 5 reads, "As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you." Verse 9 says, "For the LORD your God, will be with you wherever you go." No matter what fiery trials you have to endure, God's Word stands. He will be with you. He will never leave you nor forsake you.

I stand before you as a man who is going to be 69 years old in a few days, and I can say that I am not a Joshua. I have been given some rather important responsible duties in my life. As a candidate called to a church of 800 members, I was told by a neighboring senior pastor that I would die of a heart attack within six months. I took that pastorate and I lived, because God was with me. If I ever needed the upholding strength of God, it was then. At the same time, I became the father of six children by the time I left there to go to Australia. In that big land, which is geographically as big as the USA, God had me go to every city of 10,000 people or more on behalf of the “Back to God Hour” radio program. We put the “Back to God Hour” on radio stations in every one of those cities. Some of those Australian station masters could be tigers, lions, and bears, but I went into their dens because the Lord was with me, and they gave us a contract and we could preach the Reformed faith over the airways. God was with us at that time and in the many other tasks I had. When I suddenly received a call to go to Brazil to help set up a ThM graduate program for the church in Brazil, I thought, “Lord, how can I do this in addition to being president of Trinity Christian College?” The Lord upheld us. He was with us. There has never been a challenge where God did not keep us. That is my testimony. When God calls, He will never call you to something that He will not enable you to do. God used Joshua also, and He assured him by saying, “You will lead the people to their inheritance. I assure you, you will be fruitful. You will be successful. You will lead the people into their inheritance because I am with you, because I will give you the victory, and because I am keeping my covenant promise that I made to Abram and to Moses. This sovereign God—as He elects, as He calls, as He equips, He also blesses. That is one of the great lessons from the book of Joshua.

Not only was Joshua given assurances, but he was also given stipulations as to his character. There are two imperative verbs, *chazaq*, “be strong,” and *ematz*, “be courageous.” The negative is there too. “Do not be afraid, but be strong. Not in your own strength. I am with you. Be a man of courage. Have that inner fortitude, not just show it outwardly.” I can remember at times having sweat in the palms of my hands and having shaky knees going into some of those places—especially when I used to go into those TV offices—and then to try to show myself not overconfident, not afraid. It is impossible to meet those people face-to-face and unafraid unless there is an inner strength which only God can give.

I was born about five miles from the church where I preached my first sermon. This was in southwest Minnesota in a place called Edgerton, and when I walked into that place and stepped into the pulpit one-third of the congregation were my relatives. My tongue got thick. I had to drink a glass of water to soften my tongue so I could say, “Let us worship.” The Lord strengthens and the Lord helps. The Lord guides. He will give us that inner strength so that we can stand forth and be a positive witness. Do not be afraid of challenges.

The second thing Joshua was told to do was to obey the law. God had given His covenantal way of life and service. Joshua had to be an obedient man. If he was going to be a victorious servant, he had to be an obedient man. God said to Joshua, “Never depart the word as it has come to you from Moses.” After God spoke to Joshua, Joshua immediately went into action as we saw in chapter 2. He called all the elders together. He sent out the spies and the spies came back saying, “These people have heard how we destroyed Sihon and Og, and their hearts are melting with fear.” They crossed the Jordan River because of an act that God was performing way up the river near a place called Adam. There must have been a big landslide during the flood time and the text says that the waters piled up, far up the river, halfway between the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea so that there was about a 25 or 30-mile stretch of river that was dry. You might have wondered how 2 million people could cross through a little narrow gate. Actually, there was a 25-mile stretch of the river that dried up while it was a flood stage. God piled up the water, and the water stopped when the priests’ feet touched the water. God was at work, and that must have been very encouraging to Joshua. Then, according to chapter 5, Joshua went to scout out the

city. Some people think he went out there to pray, but I do not think that he went out there to pray. Joshua was a military strategist. The people had crossed the river and camped in the plains of Gilgal, which is a strip of land about seven or eight miles wide between Jericho and the river. Joshua went to scout. Then came the man with the sword. Joshua asks, "Are you for us or for them?" That was the wrong question. And Joshua had to meet the greater Joshua. It was the angel of the LORD, the Second Person of the Trinity. He had to fall on his face and take off his sandals show that he was the servant before the king. And Joshua did so. Confronted by the greater Joshua, the type submitted. This is the secret to leadership success. Joshua, a covenant servant, became the covenant leader.

Joshua was truly a mediator. He was the conqueror. True, he had some failings. He did not have Achan fully under control, as we read in Joshua 7 and 8. He made a covenant with the Gibeonites without consulting the Lord, but, in spite of failings, he was a conqueror. He took Jericho. He went from Jericho, took Bethel and Ai, and then he swept south and made a big circle through the south and took all the leading cities. He went north along the western side of Palestine, Canaan, and when he took Hazor way up in the north, which was the stronghold of the Canaanites, and burned it, he had broken the back of the Canaanite powers. He was a conqueror—the mediating conqueror.

Joshua chapters 14 to 22 tell us that he is the great divider of the inheritance, under God of course, but he was the one who said, "You will receive this, and you will receive that, and you will receive that." Joshua had the mediator's privilege, the mediator's responsibility, but also the mediator's prerogative.

In addition to being the divider of the inheritance, Joshua became God's agent to give the people rest. Let us read Joshua 23:1-3:

After a long time had passed and the LORD had given Israel rest from all their enemies around them, Joshua, by then old and well advanced in years, summoned all Israel—their elders, leaders, judges, officials—and said to them, "You yourselves have seen everything the LORD your God has done to all these nations for your sake..."

There was rest in the respect that there was peace. There were a lot of places where Canaanites remained, but the backbone had been broken. The people were able to say, "We have inherited. We have taken." When I turn back to Joshua 1:15, I read there too, "You are to help your brothers until the LORD gives them rest." This is Joshua speaking to the two-and-a-half tribes that stayed on the east side of the Jordan. "Rest" there meant until the major strategic battles had been fought and won. Joshua, the conqueror, Joshua, the divider of the inheritance, became the great rest-giver as an agent of the Lord.

But Joshua did more than just give rest. He renewed the covenant. Three times Joshua was a covenant renewer. We read in chapter 8 that Joshua renewed the covenant after Achan had violated it. One man could be the covenant breaker for the whole community. Achan brought disaster upon the people. In Joshua 8:33, we read that Joshua renewed the covenant because Achan, according to chapter 7:10-13, had violated it. Joshua was also very conscious of the covenant because he had the ark of the covenant before him at all times. By the way, the ark of the Covenant is referred to at least 13 times in Joshua. Remember that the ark of the Covenant represented Emmanuel, God with us, so Joshua was fully aware of the presence of God and he did as Moses did. Chapters 23 and 24 of Joshua are the same as the entire book of Deuteronomy in the life of Moses. They stand as two pillars. At the end of the lifetime and at the end of a tremendous life of service, both Moses and Joshua speak to the people.

As I read before, in chapter 23, Joshua called the elders, the judges, the officials, and the leaders and he covenanted with them. Notice the all-important aspect of leadership. Before he covenants with the



people (we read of that in the next chapter) he calls the leaders, the various representatives of authority with elders, leaders, judges, officials in verse 1 of chapter 23. Then there is an historical résumé, which is a typical introduction to covenant keeping, covenant making, covenant confirming, and covenant re-establishing. Then we have the stipulations: “Be strong, exercise the virtues of a God-honoring people, have no associations with these people who would lead you astray. Avoid their idols. Hold fast, hold fast, obey.” There is one word there that can be translated as “hold fast” or “obey.” Love the Lord. If you are going to be successful leaders, love the Lord. Joshua is old and well advanced in years. Leaders, love the Lord.

And then in verses 12 to 16, he repeats the blessings and curses. These are basic elements of the covenant, basic elements for the proper administration of the kingdom of God as it is represented in that budding theocracy in to possess the land. These leaders were indeed also to be, in a sense, mediators standing between God and the people. That is what a judge does. That is what any official does. They are in a mediating position, so they are told, “Be virtuous. No wrong associations, no questionable dealings, no idols, obedience, love. That is the way that you people will be able to serve the Lord.”

In chapter 24, we read that then they called all the people together. Notice Joshua 24:1: “Then Joshua assembled all of Israel to Shechem...” Shechem was the place where Mt. Ebal and Mt. Gerizim were. “Joshua summoned the elders, leaders, judges and officials of Israel, and they presented themselves before God. Joshua said to all the people, ‘This is what the LORD, the God of Israel says:’—and notice, now he goes back again to even pre-Abraham—“Long ago your forefathers, including Terah the father of Abraham and Nahor, lived beyond the River and worshiped other gods.”

Then God says, “But I took your father. I gave Him many descendants. I gave him Isaac. I gave Jacob and Esau to Isaac. I gave the hill country of Seir to Esau. I led Jacob and his sons to Egypt. I called Moses and Aaron. I brought your fathers out of Egypt. I brought you to the land of the Amorites, who lived east of the Jordan. They fought against you, but I gave them into your hands. I destroyed them before you and you took possession of their land.” Then he makes reference to Balak and Balaam. Joshua says, “Consider all that God has done. What a great God you people have. As He spoke, so He did. He did everything He said He would do. He performed miracles. He did the most unexpected things. You—a people that came out as a band of slaves untrained for warfare—you came through a victorious, inheriting people.” This is the historical résumé, but then the stipulation comes in verse 14: “Fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods that your forefathers worshipped beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD.” The word *serve*, *avad*, means “to work for.” But it also means “to worship.” It also means to be at all times ready to enslave yourself to God.

Then we have the response and challenge. In verse 16, we read, “Then all the people answered, ‘Far be it from us to forsake the LORD to serve other gods! It was the LORD our God himself who brought us up ... We too will serve the LORD, because he is our God.’” Joshua said to the people, “You are not able to. God is holy.” Evidently, their words sounded glib in Joshua’s ears, so Joshua challenged them and he reminded them in verse 19 that God is jealous. “He loves you. He loves you so much that He doesn’t want a half-hearted response. He doesn’t want token actions. He wants you totally and completely, and of yourself, you are not able to do this.” The people insisted, however, that they would, so Joshua said, “I guess what you are going to have to do is if you go to other gods, choose amongst the other gods.” Many people understand Joshua to be saying the choice is between between Yahweh, God, and idols. No, he says, “You have the command now to serve, love and obey God. If you refuse to do that, there are a whole lot of idol gods you can choose from.” The choice is not between God and idols. A disobedient people can make a lot of choices.

Joshua truly is a type of Christ. He has the same name as Christ: Joshua, “savior.” Joshua is a savior in the sense of bringing in all the people whom the redeemer saved. It was God who broke the back of Egypt. He defeated Egypt, He delivered them from Egypt, He kept them in the wilderness, but this idea of *yasah*, to save, surely means “to bring in.” Joshua is the great bringer-in as Jesus Christ is the bringer-in. He brings us in to the fellowship of the Father through His Spirit, and He brings us into the inheritance that He has earned for us on the cross. Joshua is a mediator type by name, but also by his task. His task is particularly the royal task: defeating the enemies and leading into the pasture of Canaan, the promised land. Joshua is never called a prophet. There is no evidence of him doing any priestly work because the priests were obedient to him and the priests did the work. The priests were under his command. The king, the royal office, was basically Joshua’s primary office. We will discuss the prophetic office now too. The prophets were there in support of the royal office. The royal office was the most important office of the three. In a way it is a triangle: king, prophet, priest. The three stood together, but the royal office, into which Adam had been placed when he was created, was primary. I want to remind you that we have that too. We are never to denigrate ourselves. As servants of Christ, we represent the king. There is a royalty about us as kings and queens. Do not be ashamed to say that you represent the king, because He is taking you into His family and you have royal prerogatives here.

The book of Joshua is a book of prophetic history. Many people treat it as a book of historical stories; they look at Joshua and say, “Dare to be a Joshua! Be like Joshua!” Instead, I tell you to look to the Lord of Joshua. Look to the great mediator whom he represented. Joshua existed to point us to Christ. Joshua is there to tell us how a man in the service of Christ, bearing Christ’s name, can lead, work, and serve. Hold the Word before you. Meditate on it. Obey it and love it. Joshua’s book is a book of prophetic history. That is, it is history with a message: the message of the Christ, the message of a sovereign God, the message of a covenant-keeping God, the message of a God who never backs off from His Word and promises.

Now we move to the Book of Judges. Judges 1 summarizes what the situation was after the death of Joshua. The Israelites asked the Lord, “Who will be the first to go up and fight for us against the Canaanites?” and the Lord answered, “Judah,” and Judah came front and center. Judah should have been the leading tribe in the days of the Judges. Judah should have been the one during that crucial period in Israel’s history to lead in claiming the inheritances. All the inheritances had not yet been claimed. There were too many pockets of the Canaanites still in the land, and Judah should have led in driving them out. We do read that Judah cleaned up the territory fairly well. It was in the area of Judah where the least Canaanite holdouts remained, but Judah did not give leadership the way it should have. That is my interpretation. Many of the enemies were not conquered, as we read in Judges chapter 1 and especially chapter 2:1-2:

The angel of the LORD went up from Gilgal to Bokim and said, “I brought you out of Egypt and led you into the land that I swore to give to your forefathers. I said, ‘I will never break my covenant with you, and you shall not make a covenant with the people of this land, but you shall break down their altars.’ Yet you have disobeyed me.”

The angel of the LORD, Christ Himself in a theophanic appearance, comes and tells these people that God is keeping covenant, but they are not. They are covenant-breakers and, therefore, deserving of the curse, because God keeps covenant. God keeps covenant for blessing and God keeps covenant for cursing. Either way, God keeps covenant—for covenant-keepers, blessing; for covenant-breakers, curses.

There you have it in chapter 2, verse 3: “Now therefore I tell you that I will not drive them out before you; they will be thorns in your sides and their gods will be a snare to you.” Then the people cried bitter tears, for it was almost too late. The enemies were not conquered. In chapter 3:1-6, we read a list of the nations that were left. But first of all, look at the sins that are particularly referred to. There was the sin against God. They worshipped Baal. They broke the first commandment.

Baal worship was a derogatory, demeaning type of worship. It was full of sexual overtones and sexual activities. Their worship involved a stone pillar that represented an enlarged male organ. The Asherah highly accentuated the female genitals and breasts. We read in Amos, that even in the days of Amos a father and his son would go up to the prostitutes before the Asherah and perform sacred prostitution. That was what Baal worship was all about. The people also intermarried, as we read in Judges 3:6: “They took their daughters in marriage and gave their own daughters to their sons and served their gods.” It happened just as Balaam had told the Moabites, “One way you can get these people is get their sons and daughters to intermarry.” Missions and marriage do not mix. It never has, but they intermarried even though it was so specifically stated in Deuteronomy 7 that they would bring the curse upon them if their sons took their girls in marriage and they gave their girls to their Canaanite people in marriage. This was a sure way of violating the covenant, because the seed was so important for the continuity of God’s people. When the seed gets mixed, very seldom does a good apple come from the mix. In fact, I have never known a good apple to make a rotten apple good. The people sinned further by their violence, as we read in chapter 9, the case of Abimelech, and in the two last chapters, where we read of the war between Israel and the Benjamites. The land was filled with violence as in the days of Noah.

Evil was practiced. God specifically allowed those people to stay there to test Israel, as He says in chapter 3: “I do this to test you.” If God did that to test the people, how did the covenant stipulations and promises hold? We have seen that already in the first three chapters of Judges. God never withdrew any of His stipulations. God never withdrew any of His promises, not even the promise of curses. God never withdrew those, because God is a covenant-keeping God. His promises for blessings are “yes,” and “amen,” and His assurances of the curses are “yes,” and “amen.” God does not change. We read that in Malachi. God is a steadfast, unchanging God. Having committed Himself, He remains Himself, and the people in the time of the judges had an unchanging God, but they saw another side of God than they had seen mostly under Joshua. They had seen under Joshua a victorious way of life—conquering the Canaanites, inheriting the land they had not worked for. Now under the period of the judges, again and again and again they became slaves. They were whipped into servitude. They were hungry. They had to go into hiding. They were killed in battle. This was the covenant curse, reminding them again and again of what the eventual full judgment would be of a covenant cursing God, but did God leave them? No, the judges came. They came as deliverers. The royal mediatorial position was again set forth. The judges did not come as prophets. We will talk about Samuel the prophet next time. The judges did not come as priests. The judges came as leaders, deliverers, and shepherds. They had to do some judging work. The judges represented the royal office. They represented God in the theocracy. Some of them were not very good representatives, like Samson, or like Gideon, a tremendous courageous man who showed his weakness when he set up an idol at the end after his victories.

The judges served locally and it may well be that some judges judged different places simultaneously, like one in the north and one in the south. If you add up all the years, you get many more than the 300 years that are necessary for biblical chronology. The judges served locally, but they served as victorious leaders and they served only for a time as these leaders. Of some it is said that they would continue as judge. There was one female judge. When men refused to take up the lead, when Barak would not lead, Deborah led. In crucial times, it is amazing how God can use a strong woman, and in the case of Deborah, He did.

The judges were non-dynastic. Abimelech, the son of Gideon, tried to set up a Gideonite dynasty. Gideon had been the great successful destroyer of the Midianites and now Abimelech tried to become the royal one, succeeding in Gideon's line. Gideon had refused to be king. Gideon had refused to enthrone any of his sons. Abimelech tried it, but the story is there to show that God did not intend the judges to be dynastic. The judges were not to build royal families that would pass from father to son to grandson to great-grandson.

What was one of the great needs in the days of the judges? They needed a king. They needed someone to represent their theocratic Lord. The role of the king is clearly implied. At the end of the Book of Judges there are a number of very sad instances. These things that are recorded there are not to be taken as chronologically following Samson, but this is what happened during those 300 years. We read three times, "And in those days, Israel had no king." Judges tells us how, without the proper leadership, without the proper king, there was great violence, disobedience, misuse of the Levitical office, misuse of the priesthood, and abominations even in the type of worship God had prescribed. You read about how the Israelites fought the Benjamites and how the tribe of Benjamin was almost wiped out and how they had to go out and steal girls at a party. My wife and I read that for devotions a couple of days ago in preparation for this. She sat there shaking her head and she said, "God did let this people do some crazy things. He kept the tribe alive by letting the men go out and snatch girls that were having a good time at a party." Were you aware of that? Read the last chapter of Judges: "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit."

In those days, the people of Israel had no king. They did have a king, but that king was not directly, permanently, dynastically represented in their midst. They did not have a God-fearing king, a God-honoring king, a God-serving king, one who really represented the Lord of the theocracy. Israel had to know that they were vassals, they were servants, they were called to be God's people, to be a blessing for the nations. Because they did not realize this, they became the victims of the nations, because they had no recognition of their king. This sets the stage for Samuel, Saul, and David, to which we will turn next time.