



# SAFEGUARDS FOR THE SOUL

*SERIES: IMAGES OF WARFARE AND WORSHIP*

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Joshua 23:1-16

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As a society we are very adept at self-preservation. We have car alarms, smoke alarms and home alarms. We have dead bolts on our doors. We have "The Club" to protect our cars. We carry home, automobile, health and life insurance. We are diligent to get physical examinations and flu shots. We visit health clubs and watch work-out videos. We have air bags and bicycle helmets. We have antibiotics, antidepressants and antioxidants. We have anti-virus software and secure browsers. We have 403b's and 401k's that we chart daily on the Web. Our bank accounts are federally insured. We have registered, certified and insured mail. We have caller ID, \*69, 911, and call blocking. We guard our physical lives and our possessions with dogged tenacity. But what about our souls? Do we guard them with the same diligence and fervency as our possessions?

In the final chapters of the book of Joshua we will look at two farewell addresses by Joshua to the people of Israel. These two speeches are similar to his farewell address to the two and one-half tribes whose inheritance lay east of the Jordan (chapter 22). They are also similar to the words which the Lord spoke to Joshua in chapter 1. Their central themes are worship and covenant loyalty. Every word and phrase comes right out of the book of Deuteronomy. These are not new words and new ideas. They are old words and old truths that need constant repetition, sentiments that are designed to protect, preserve and safeguard the soul. Though the land had been conquered and possessed, danger still lurked. This is a word for Christians, too. The fact that we have come to Christ doesn't mean that we can coast along and fail to guard our spiritual life.

In the opening verses of chapter 23, Joshua introduces the thoughts he wants to leave with the Israelites:

**Now it came about after many days, when the LORD had given rest to Israel from all their enemies on every side, and Joshua was old, advanced in years, that Joshua called for all Israel, for their elders and their heads and their judges and their officers, and said to them, "I am old, advanced in years. And you have seen all that the LORD your God has done to all these nations because of you, for the LORD your God is He who has been fighting for you. See, I have apportioned to you these nations which remain as an inheritance for your tribes, with all the nations which I have cut off, from the Jordan even to the Great Sea toward the setting of the sun. And the LORD your God, He shall thrust them out from before you and drive them from before you; and you shall possess their land, just as the LORD your God promised you." (Josh. 23:1-5, NASB)**

These are Joshua's parting words, his last will and testament to the nation as he passes the torch onto the next generation. His address is similar to that given by Moses (Deut. 31:1-13), Samuel (1 Sam. 12:1-24), and David (1 Kgs.

2:1-9). Both Moses and Joshua had kept faith up to the time of their death, therefore they were models for the next generation (2 Tim. 3:10-4:6; 2 Pet. 1:12-21). What a wonderful scene this was, as Joshua summoned the leaders and the people of Israel to hear his last words to them.

Some years ago I was among a group of PBC interns who spent a day visiting with Bob Smith, one of the founders of the church. Bob shared with us about his relationship with God and the principles of Christian ministry. I remember how blessed I felt to sit at the feet of this godly man who was leaving such a great legacy for us to follow. I imagine that this occasion when Joshua spoke to the Israelites was similar in tone.

As he begins his address, Joshua recalls God's past faithfulness to Israel, how God had driven out the nations who had inhabited the land of Canaan. Joshua reminds the people that they did not win these battles on their own. The Lord had fought for Israel, and now he had given them rest from all their enemies, as he had promised Joshua in chapter 1.

Certain work still remained to be done, however. Pockets of enemies still remained in the land. As each tribe went to possess their allotted territory they were responsible to continue what Joshua had begun, driving out the nations that remained. To fully possess the land, Israel must continue to dispossess these enemies. The words "drive out" and "possess," in verse 5, come from the same Hebrew word. Dispossess and possess are two sides of the same coin. In order to possess, one must first dispossess. Joshua tells the new generation that while he has had great success, now they must continue the fight. And, of course, God promised to be with them to fight for them.

Why didn't Joshua knock out all the enemies in the land? you ask. Why did Israel have to battle those that remained? The answer is that each generation had to learn how to battle. Each generation had to learn faith in the God who fought for Israel. It is no different in the church. Each generation has to engage in the battle between the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of the world, the war between the spirit and the flesh. Each believer who has entered into life in Christ has to heed the call and enter into this battle. Faith is not inherited. We learn much from the godly men and women who have gone before us, but there will come a time when each of us must face the battle and learn that God will fight for us as well and dispossess our enemies. Nobody can do it for us.

This is a great lesson for me in ministry, because my tendency is to try to fix people's problems. I can't do that, of course, no one can, and I shouldn't try to, either. What a great truth this is for parents, too! We must release our children so they can fight their own battles and resist rushing in to take care of things for them. Last Saturday night I

got a telephone call from my son, telling me his car had broken down outside Santa Barbara. My usual response would be to tell him I'd be right there to help him solve the problem. And that's what I wanted to do, but I could not. But it was a good lesson for him to handle that problem himself. Each of us must either stand or fall, but stand we will, because we are in Christ and it is he who fights for us.

What will it take for the next generation of Israel to enjoy success in defeating the nations that remain? Joshua's answer is, covenant loyalty. As their spiritual life goes, so will go Israel's efforts in dispossessing the enemy.

In verses 6-11 now, Joshua impresses upon the nation three phrases to safeguard their souls.

The first phrase is this: Be strong to guard and to obey the word. Verses 6-7:

**"Be very firm, then, to keep and do all that is written in the book of the law of Moses, so that you may not turn aside from it to the right hand or to the left, in order that you may not associate with these nations, these which remain among you, or mention the name of their gods, or make anyone swear by them, or serve them, or bow down to them."**

The phrase literally reads, "be strong to guard and to do all that is written in the book of the law of Moses." This word "strong" is the same term that is used in the oft repeated phrase in Joshua, "be strong and courageous." "Keep" means to guard or watch over; the root idea is to "exercise great care over." This is the key word in Joshua's farewell address, in chapter 22, and it is key here as well. It is used in reference to covenant obligations, laws and statutes. But it is also used of keeping a garden, a flock, a house and guarding against intruders. The first way we safeguard our soul is to guard the word: to meditate on it and obey it. Scripture says, "Thy word is a lamp to my feet" (Ps. 119:105). Let us be diligent to guard it with care.

Why are we instructed to do this? Joshua warns Israel that if they turn their gaze from the word and associate (go in) with the other nations (inter-marry with them), then they will begin to bow down to their gods. They will swear vows by them and serve them. In other words, they will begin to worship idols. But the word guards our souls from such idolatry. Notice that the purpose for the word is not so that we might feel better about ourselves. It is not given to please our parents or to earn God's approval. It is given for our preservation. We are to guard the word and to do it so that we will not be influenced by the world and fall into idolatry. The word is a compass that keeps us on the right course, directing our path so that we will not get lost. It teaches us about how we are to live in a way that is pleasing to God. What a blessing we have in the word of God! Without it we would be clueless about how we are to live. This is why we are to meditate on the word day and night.

Henri Nouwen has a good word for us here. He writes:

Reading the scriptures is not as easy as it seems since in our academic world we tend to make anything and everything we read subject to analysis and discussion. But the word of God should lead us first of all to contemplation and meditation. Instead of taking the words apart, we should bring them together in our innermost

being. Instead of wondering if we agree or disagree, we should wonder which words are directly spoken to us and connect directly with our most personal story. Instead of thinking about the words as potential subjects for an interesting dialogue or paper, we should be willing to let them penetrate into the most hidden corners of our heart, even to those places where no other word has yet found entrance. Then and only then can the word bear fruit as seed sown in rich soil. Only then can we really "hear and understand" (*Reaching Out*, 35-36).

So the first instruction for Israel is that they are to be strong to guard the word and obey it.

The second is: Cling to the Lord your God.

**"But you are to cling to the LORD your God, as you have done to this day. For the LORD has driven out great and strong nations from before you; and as for you, no man has stood before you to this day. One of your men puts to flight a thousand, for the LORD your God is He who fights for you, just as He promised you." (23:8-10)**

Joshua's second phrase is, "cling to the Lord." The word means to cleave, to adhere. It is the same word that is used in Genesis 2 in reference to marriage, when "a man shall leave his father and his mother and shall cleave to his wife, and they shall become one flesh" (2:24). Our relationship with God is like that: it is a one-flesh relationship, a deeply complex, mysterious union in which our life and Christ's life are inextricably joined together. So we are to cultivate oneness with God as we would with a spouse.

Why are we to cling to God? Because God fights for his people. Notice Joshua's words, "The LORD has dispossessed great and strong nations from before you...no man has stood before you to this day. One of your men puts to flight a thousand, for the LORD your God is He who fights for you." If we do not cling to God we will be easy pickings for our enemies. We will be defenseless against them. We will be cut off from our spiritual resources and we will seek strength from other allies. We must cultivate our union with God because he is our strength, our refuge, shelter, and protector.

And how do we cling to God? In the same way that we cultivate oneness in marriage: we must spend time with God. We must talk to him and listen to him. We must spend time in quiet and solitude. In the dark night of the soul we must reach out and grasp hold of him and him alone.

When my children were little, at bedtime they would call out, "Taxi!" and wrap themselves around my legs, wanting to be dragged to their bedrooms. Nothing could make them release their grip on me. This is how we are to cling to God. T. S. Eliot wrote: "It's bad tonight, my nerves are shattered. Just talk to me. I'll make it through the night." That is clinging to God and looking for deliverance from him and him alone.

Joshua's third phrase is: Guard your soul to love God.

**"So take diligent heed to yourselves to love the LORD your God." (23:11)**

Joshua urges the people, "Take diligent heed to yourselves to love the LORD your God." Literally, this phrase reads, "so you must guard greatly your souls to love Yah-

weh your God.” The word “guard” is the same word as in verse 6. “Love” is another word that speaks of a marriage relationship. There is a progression in the text as we move deeper and deeper into our heart, from obedience, to union, to love.

Loving God is our highest calling. This is the very essence of the law: “Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one! And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might” (Deut. 6:4-5). Loving God in your heart means much more than merely behaving correctly and doing the right thing, however. Our relationship with God is not held together by duty, contracts or rules. It is a relationship that is bound by commitment, passion and wild abandonment of ourselves to another. This is how God loves us—and his greatest joy is for us to love him in the same way. Augustine said, “There can only be two basic loves, the love of God unto the forgetfulness of self, or the love of self unto the forgetfulness and denial of God.”

The question we are forced to ask is not whether we know God or believe in him, but, rather, do we love him? Do we love him more than our spouse, success, degrees, possessions or jobs? Do we love him more than life itself? Do we love him in spite of disappointments and heartache? That is the question that Jesus put to Peter and it is the question that he asks us, too. Will we guard this love with as much care as we guard our house, our car, our children? To be a disciple of Jesus means that we take up our cross daily, denying ourselves and following him out of devotion and love. St. John of the Cross said, “At the evening of our day we shall be judged by our loving.” Do we truly love God?

What is really beyond comprehension is that we have the capacity, the opportunity and the possibility to be in a love relationship with God because of the cross of Christ. This God who is the Creator of the universe, the redeemer of mankind, the one who controls every event of every day throughout the world, wants us to love him freely. That is his greatest joy. How privileged we are!

We have been given a wonderful gift then, life in Christ. In him, God delivers us from the world, defeating fortified enemies in miraculous ways. But this life of faith does not run on automatic. We can't program a timer that turns on a spiritual sprinkler to water our soul for ten minutes every morning. There are still enemies remaining that would keep us from possessing this life fully: the flesh, sinful habits, misplaced love, idols. To keep us from the influence of these things we need to give great care to our spiritual life, as Joshua instructs: guarding, doing, clinging, loving. Whether at war or rest, we must guard our soul.

When my wife was getting ready to travel to Guatemala recently to visit the faith project that we are involved in down there, our daughter Annie put together a care package of her favorite treats for her. Included in the basket was a Bible in which Annie had included a morning devotional for each day of the week. These were hand written letters, personal words of encouragement, to guard her mother's soul. How gratifying that was to Liz! In the word of God we have a priceless possession, hand written letters to each one of personally. Let us not fail to cultivate it and cherish it.

What will happen to Israel if they do not safeguard their

soul? In this closing section, Joshua warns the nation, using very sobering words. If they can't be motivated by love, then perhaps they will be motivated by fear.

Verses 12-13:

**“For if you ever go back and cling to the rest of these nations, these which remain among you, and intermarry with them, so that you associate with them and they with you, know with certainty that the LORD your God will not continue to drive these nations out from before you; but they shall be a snare and a trap to you, and a whip on your sides and thorns in your eyes, until you perish from off this good land which the LORD your God has given you.”**

Joshua cautions Israel against returning and clinging to the nations remaining in the land. The action of clinging (verse 12) is matched with verse 8. If you cling to the Lord, he will fight for you. However, if you do not, but choose instead to cling to others, then God will not drive out these enemies. Inter-marriage is the concern here; it is not a matter of racial or ethnic identity. If Israel inter-married with the nations around them, the less demanding standard would prevail and they would end up worshipping false gods.

This is always the concern when Christians marry non-believers. It is one of the primary ways that Satan attacks the church and destroys the purity of the soul. When one becomes a Christian, it is almost certain that there will be an enticing but unedifying love relationship waiting around the corner.

The results of idolatry are drastic. God will not dispossess the enemy but, rather, will allow him to remain as a source of constant frustration. Joshua makes use of four metaphors to describe how these enemies would function in the lives of the people.

First, they would become a “snare.” This word refers to a bird trap. It is used figuratively of ensnaring for calamities and plots (Hos. 5:1; Amos 3:5).

Second, a “trap” is a bait or lure in a fowler's net. The word is used figuratively for what allures and entraps one, leading to disaster and ruin. It is that which allures one from his real purpose and then destroys him (Exod. 23:33; Deut. 7:16; Judg. 2:3; 8:27; Ps. 106:36; alliances with Canaanites Exod. 34:12). “And you shall consume all the peoples whom the LORD your God will deliver to you; your eye shall not pity them, neither shall you serve their gods, for that would be a snare to you” (Deut. 7:16).

The third metaphor is, a “whip on your sides.” A whip is a scourge for chastisement. In Prov. 26:3 it is likened to a rod for the back of fools. Joshua is saying that the enemies that remained would become a rod of discipline to be used by God against Israel.

And fourth, these nations would become for Israel a “thorn in your eyes.” A “thorn” is a prick or barb. The remaining nations would be a constant source of irritation, like a particle of dirt in the eye. “But if you do not drive out the inhabitants of the land from before you, then it shall come about that those whom you let remain of them will become as pricks in your eyes and as thorns in your sides, and they shall trouble you in the land in which you live” (Num. 33:55).

The principle is that if we do not drive out the enemies in the land, which, for believers, is associated with the deeds of the flesh and attachments to the world, then the sins and habits of our flesh and the associated consequences will haunt us for the rest of our lives. If we allow them to live, God will no longer drive them out. The things that we love more than God, the things that we cling to and depend on will end up enslaving us and will be the cause of constant frustration and trouble.

One cannot be neutral in the battle between the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of this world. Either the saint or the sinner must prevail. The one who is not for Christ is against him. A desire for peaceful coexistence will not cut it. The uncommitted will be destroyed. There is a point when God abandons sinners to their wicked desires. If we do not use the truth that God has given to us we will lose it and we will be overrun by the enemy.

How certain is this? Look at verse 14.

**“Now behold, today I am going the way of all the earth, and you know in all your hearts and in all your souls that not one word of all the good words which the LORD your God spoke concerning you has failed; all have been fulfilled for you, not one of them has failed.”**

To drive home the truth of these principles, Joshua reminds Israel that God will fulfill his word. The nation is already keenly aware that not one good word which the Lord has spoken has failed to come to pass, therefore, they can be assured that not one evil word will fail, either. If God's people guard the word to do it there will be blessing, but if they break covenant loyalty, then God's anger will burn against them. This is exactly what happened to Israel, and this is what will happen to us, too, if we fail to guard the word to do it.

God is not capricious. We do not have to live in anxiety. We know exactly what will happen. We cannot say that we were unaware of the consequences of wrongful actions. We are fully informed. God speaks clearly both promises to inspire love and threats to provoke fear. If we obey we will be blessed; if we disobey we will suffer the consequences. As Paul said, “Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap”

(Gal. 6:7). What a sobering word this is for young people, especially! Start loving the Lord early in life. You will never regret your decision.

When we look at this passage objectively, we must readily admit that it is an absurd thing to exchange the love of God for the worship of an idol, and yet we know from experience that it is hard to guard our spiritual life. Let us therefore remember two things.

First, we must recognize and acknowledge how vulnerable we are to idolatry. This is the implication of our text. We are easily seduced to worship and serve other gods. At times we will be severely tempted to love someone or something more than God. This is God's greatest heartache, because he is a jealous husband. We are in a marriage relationship with him, but worshipping idols is akin to having an adulterous affair. And the same thing that is true of marriage is true of our love relationship with God. If we think we are safe, if we think for one moment that we can coast, that we are invulnerable, then we are in the most dangerous position of all. The best way to keep either a marriage or the spiritual life pure is to know how vulnerable we are and live in constant recognition of that fact.

Second, we need to assess the value of our soul. Jesus asked, “For what is a man profited if he gains the whole world, and loses or forfeits himself?” (Luke 9:25). Jesus implies that our soul is worth more than all the riches of the world. If the world places a value of three million dollars on a baseball (Mark McGwire's 70th home run ball), what value can we place on something that is priceless? Abraham Heschel said, “Our life is not our own property but a possession of God. And it is this divine ownership that makes life a sacred thing.” When we realize the value of our spiritual life, then we will give it the care and attention it needs. We will center ourselves on Jesus every day. We will guard our souls, resolving by his grace to obey him, to cling to him, and love him.

If every thought we ponder, every conversation we engage in, and every action we take arises out of our love for God and our devotion to him, everything else will be fine. May God grant that we will place loving God and serving him before everything else in life.

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