

Joshua Chapter 14 Warnings and Counsels

by A.B. Simpson

The sermon warns against the dangers of declension and ruin in the Christian life, emphasizing the need for humble vigilance, steadfastness, and dependence on God's faithfulness.

Scripture: Joshua 24:14

Topics: "Faithfulness", "Spiritual Vigilance"

Description

A.B. Simpson emphasizes the importance of faithfulness to God as he reflects on Joshua's parting charges to Israel. He warns that reliance on others, incomplete obedience, and self-confidence can lead to spiritual decline, as seen in Israel's history after Joshua's leadership. Simpson highlights the necessity of personal conviction and the dangers of complacency in faith, urging believers to remain vigilant and dependent on God's strength. He reminds the congregation of God's faithfulness and the need to remember His past mercies as motivation to uphold their covenant with Him. The sermon concludes with a call to recognize our weaknesses and to abide in Christ for true strength and perseverance.

Transcript

Joshua 24.

This chapter contains the parting charges of Joshua to Israel at Shechem. He reviews the faithfulness of God, and all His gracious promises and leadings, and then solemnly pledges them to fidelity to Him and His holy covenant. And when they respond to His appeal and promise to serve the Lord with faithfulness, he reminds them that they are unable to serve Him in their own strength, and then reiterates his own determination for him and his household to serve the Lord, whatsoever others may do. The chapter closes with a very humbling statement that the children of Israel served the Lord faithfully during all the days of Joshua and the elders who survived him, and the generation that had known the works of the Lord in Canaan, but we learn from the later Book of Judges, that before the third generation they were sunk in apostasy and captivity, and the glory of their early victories had been exchanged for a declension and degradation far more terrible than the story of Israel's wanderings for forty years in the wilderness.

For us there is the solemn lesson that, notwithstanding all the promises of the Gospel and the abundant grace of Christ, there is need of the humblest vigilance and the closest abiding, even in the highest places of our Christian life. The greater the height, the greater the fall, and the deeper the degradation. Israel's wanderings in the wilderness after they came out of Egypt lasted only forty years, but Israel's declension and degradation, under the Judges, lasted over four hundred years.

For an ordinary Christian to go back from God is a very serious thing; but for one who has known Him in all the fulness of His grace, to turn aside from the higher pathway of a life of consecration, is a far more serious and dangerous thing; and the Word of God is full of the most faithful and solemn warnings and admonitions to even those who have entered into the fulness of Jesus, to watch and stand fast, lest, being led away by the error of the wicked, they fall from their own steadfastness. While on the one hand, we have the most gracious promises of our Father keeping us, yet at the same time, we have the most faithful warnings to abide and obey.

The echoes of this chapter ring through the New Testament, and especially those chapters that speak of our higher Christian life. When John tells us, "The anointing you have received of Him abides in you," he also adds, "And now, little children, abide in Him, that when He shall appear we may have confidence, and not be ashamed before Him at His coming." While Paul says, "I know in whom I have believed, and am persuaded that He is able to keep that which I have committed to Him against that day"; yet he also adds, "That good thing which was committed unto you keep by the Holy Ghost which dwells in us." While in one breath, the Spirit says, "There has no temptation befallen you, but such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted beyond that you are able, but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that you may be able to bear it," He also adds, "Wherefore, let him that thinks he stands take heed lest he fall."

God's Word is not a cast-iron system of theology, proclaiming infallible security for any man, irrespective of his own attitude, but it is the wise and loving touch of a mother's hand, on the side of our spiritual life that needs adjustment, whether it be encouragement to lift us up, or admonition and warning to hold us back from presumption and disobedience. It would have been as cruel and unwise to encourage David, in the time of his disobedience, as to have discouraged Simon Peter, when his heart was breaking with remorse and sorrow. The one needed stern rebuke, to let him see his sin, and the other needed hope and comfort, to reveal to him his Savior's mercy. Therefore, let us not think it strange, if at one time we hear the Holy Scriptures saying, "They shall never perish, neither shall any pluck them out of My hand"; and at another time, "If a man abide not in Me, he is cast forth as a branch that is withered." The very warning is designed to prevent the peril to which it refers.

What were some of the causes of Israel's declension?

DEPENDENCE ON OTHERS

1. The first was, perhaps, their undue dependence upon Joshua and the fathers who had brought them into the land. "They served the Lord during the days of Joshua and the elders that survived him and who had seen the works of the Lord," but when these had passed away and they were thrown upon their own strength, resources and character, they did not have those elements of stability, principle and permanence, which were sufficient to preserve them from the unholy influence of the surrounding nations, and so they gradually sank back again into heathenism.

There are many persons whose religious character is a reflection of the influence of others. Like young Josiah, who served the Lord during the days of Jehoiadah, his adopted father, and turned back to evil when he was gone, so these persons manifest much sympathetic goodness under the influence of favorite teachers and high examples, and in seasons of deep religious excitement, they may even seem to pass through an experience of great spiritual life, exhibiting many of its emotions and some of its fruits; but when these influences are withdrawn, it becomes evident that there was no real conviction of purpose and

will, and no radical transformation of character.

The test will come to all such souls; they will find these favorable influences withdrawn, and these helpful surroundings changed, and they will be compelled to fall back on their own resources and their own direct knowledge of God and His sustaining grace. And when no longer pressed forward by stronger spirits and upheld by helpful hands, but met by opposition, misunderstanding, uncongenial associations, and, perhaps, direct persecution, they will soon find whether their purpose is rooted in God, and their spirit united to the living Christ and abiding in Him as the source of their strength and service. If this, indeed, be so, they will continue even in isolation and opposition, and Jeremiah's picture of the man "whose hope the Lord is" shall be gloriously fulfilled in them. "He shall be as a tree planted by the waters, and that spreads out her roots by the river, and shall not see when heat comes but her leaf shall be green; and shall not be careful in the year of drought, neither shall cease from yielding fruit."

The secret of Joshua's victory was that he had long before this learned to stand alone. To him the day had come, more than half a century before, when the unfaithful spies and the whole congregation turned against him, refusing to follow him, and even threatening to destroy him, while he and his faithful companion stood fast to their principles at Kadesh Barnea. His purpose was not affected by the failure of the multitude to follow him. It was not much more affected by the enthusiasm of the second generation to enter with him the land of promise. And even now, as he stood on the high and glorious elevation of an accomplished and victorious life, he was still as ready as ever to stand alone, and his lofty independence expresses itself in the heroic words: "Choose this day whom you will serve, but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

This must ever be the secret of steadfastness in the consecrated life. You must know the truth of the Lord for yourself, and commit yourself to it and to Him, even if you have to stand alone. You must be so persuaded of it that you cannot surrender it even if you die, and you must know the Lord so definitely for yourself, and not for another, that even if all the Christians in the world should fail, and all your friends forsake you, you must still stand and exclaim, "Here I stand; I can do no other, so help me God."

Stronger than all the power of Babylon is the spirit of the men who stand in the fiery furnace, and say, "We are not careful to answer you in this matter, O king. If it be so, our God is able to deliver us out of the fiery furnace, and He will deliver us out of your hand, O king; but if not, be it known unto you that we will not serve your gods nor worship the golden image which you have set up."

IMPERFECT WORK

2. The second cause of Israel's declension was their failure to do thorough work, especially in separating from and exterminating their enemies. We read in the beginning of the Book of Judges of many of the tribes of Canaan, whom they should have thoroughly subjugated, that the children of Judah could not drive out of the valley, Judg. 1: 19; and that the children of Benjamin did not drive out the Jebusites that inhabited Jerusalem, Judg. 1: 21; nor did Manasseh drive out the inhabitants of Beth-Shean and her towns, but the Canaanites would dwell in the land, Judg. 1: 27; nor did Ephraim drive out the Canaanites in Gezer, but the Canaanites dwelt in Gezer among them, and so of many of the other tribes. Not only so, but Israel, in some cases, put the Canaanites to tribute, Judg. 1: 28-30; making it even a profitable business, and a source of income to have them remain, when the Lord had commanded their utter extermination.

And still worse, we find them even entering into forbidden alliances with them, and also intermarrying among their sons and daughters, Judg. 3: 5, 6. God's command to them had been, "You shall make no covenant with the inhabitants of this land, you shall throw down their altars; you shall smite them and utterly destroy them; you shall make no covenant with them, nor show mercy unto them, nor shall you make marriages with them; your daughter you shall not give unto his son, nor his daughter shall you take unto your son."

But here we read, "The children dwelt among the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites; and they took their daughters to be their wives; and they gave their daughters to their sons, and they served their gods." Israel had become content with the victories which had subdued their more formidable foes, and given them the chief strongholds of the land, but in a thousand little places the enemy still lurked and lingered, and gradually became tolerated. The danger of their continuance did not seem very great, and the trouble and cost of their extermination seemed greater than the courage and patience of Israel. Thus they were suffered to remain, half conquered, and for the time, wholly subordinate. In a little while it became a source of profit to collect tribute from these bold giants, and so, many of them were made tributary to Israel, contrary to the divine command.

A little later, relations of friendship and fellowship began to be established, and before long they were intermarrying with the tribes of Israel and raising a mongrel race in which the true seed would soon be wholly extinguished; and to crown all, they naturally began to serve the idols of their heathen friends, and to mingle in all the abominations of their unholy religion; thus becoming in the end, really apostate from the worship of the true God altogether.

This is the sad story of the development of evil in many a life, which once seemed wholly consecrated. Little sins are left unsubdued. Like Saul they destroy the Amalekites, but they spare Agag, their king, for some good purpose, as they suppose, and keep the best of the spoil with the idea that they are going to sacrifice it unto the Lord. They have not the courage to deal bravely and firmly with evil. After awhile they begin to turn it to profitable account and tolerate certain forms of sin and worldliness because of advantage. Their business interests would be ruined by too rigid a conscientiousness, for some of their investments are not wholly separated from forbidden associations; the profits, at least, will be divided with the Lord, and the end will sanctify the means. A thousand specious and plausible excuses are made for things that ought to be thoroughly put aside and which, like the Canaanites, they put under tribute, and try to justify because of some advantage that can be brought out of them.

By and by, the social element is introduced. Families that were separated from unholy friendships and ungodly alliances, become mixed with the world in the social reception, the promiscuous dance, or perhaps, in the milder form of the church entertainment. If the old people still retain their separation, yet they let their sons and daughters mingle with the Canaanites, and they do not shrink from even permitting the marriage of a Christian girl with the godless man, or receiving into this consecrated home, as the bride of a son, devoted in infancy to God, some bright and fascinating daughter of fashion, who soon succeeds in subverting all the separation to God that has been left, until it is not far now to the last step of the worship of idolatry, the unrestrained career of worldly amusement, covetousness which is idolatry, and the carnival of godless selfishness and pleasure.

Dr. Livingstone tells of a singular creature which he found in Africa, called the ant-lion. It attacked and destroyed the strongest victims by a masterful piece of strategy. Excavating a little pit in the form of an inverted cone, running to a point at the bottom, it sits down at the base of its little pitfall and waits for some

unsuspecting beetle or insect to tread too near the edge of the crumbling sand. The unhappy victim at last approaches, and perhaps prompted by curiosity, looks over the edge of this strange excavation, and lo! in a moment he has lost his balance and rolls down the side of the little pit where the ant-lion waits for his prey. Not, however, directly and instantly does the destroyer attack his victim; this might be too unequal a contest for the little strategist, but he suddenly opens his sharp little mouth, formed like a pair of powerful scissors, and with one quick movement he cuts off a limb from the unsuspecting victim and then disappears out of sight. Slowly the mutilated creature recovers itself, and climbs up the slippery side of the pit; but just as he reaches the summit his footing slips again and he tumbles once more into the jaws of the little monster. Another quick movement and another limb is gone; and again the wounded insect gathers up his remaining strength and makes another ascent of the side of this death trap, but the result is the same as before; again he sinks to receive a fresh blow, and the process is repeated until at length he is so dismembered that he has not strength enough even to attempt to escape, but sinks, a bleeding, suffering mass, into the hands of his enemy, who devours at leisure the antagonist that he would not have dared to approach directly.

This, alas! is the story of many a defeated and ruined life. Some little adversary that was not even dreaded, has been the final destroyer, not by only one bold attack, but by a thousand little wounds that, at last, have left the victim helpless to resist or to return.

Saul's career is a sad example of a noble beginning, ending in mournful disaster; and the saddest part of it is the very smallness of the cause where the pathway of declension and ruin began. It was simply in this very thing of refusing to deal firmly with the enemies of God. The reason of his failure was because of his deeper fear to deal firmly with the sin and self-will of his own heart. Saul's failure to slay Agag and his soft dealings with the Amalekite chief, were but the outward type of his tolerance of a greater giant in his own heart, even his own self-will, and the spirit of disobedience which, Samuel tells him, was expressed by his conduct in this case, and was the ground of his rejection and the secret of his final ruin. But not all at once did Saul go down; for nearly ten years did he still sit upon Israel's throne and work out the dreadful proceeds of sin's development, leading from step to step, until at last a branded murderer, a slave of blind and furious passion, and an awful instrument of Satan's very possession, he closed his wretched life in tragedy almost as dark as the story of Judas.

Oh! let us beware how we tolerate a single sin, how we leave an enemy in the land, how we make terms with any forbidden thing, how to enter into alliance with the world, or let its spirit touch our fondest affections. "We cannot serve God and mammon." We cannot compromise with any evil thing and remain in the Land of Promise. We cannot abide in His love without keeping His commandments. "Wherefore come out from among them, and be separate, says the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, and you shall be My sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty."

SELF-CONFIDENCE

3. Perhaps the most serious cause of their failure was their inability to understand their own weakness. It was the spirit of self-sufficiency and self-confidence that brought about their ruin. There was a deep meaning in the words of Joshua which they could not understand. "You cannot serve the Lord," said their faithful leader. He knew better than they the weakness of their own hearts. They were ready enough to promise and to purpose, but they knew not how certain they were to go back again to the forbidden sin. Their fathers at Sinai had been as ready to answer, under the terrors of the mount, "All that the Lord has spoken we will do," but before the month was ended they were dancing around the golden calf. Peter was

ready enough to promise, "Though all men should deny you, yet will not I," and yet, before the next noon-day, Peter was among the enemies of his Lord, a blaspheming, broken-hearted man.

The deepest need of our spiritual life is to know our utter helplessness, weakness and liability to err. Then we shall lean on His stronger arm, and in self-distrust abide in Him, knowing that apart from Him we can do nothing. This was the great lesson of the Old Testament discipline. "The law made nothing perfect, but," praise the Lord, "the bringing in of a better hope did." "What the law could not do, because it was weak through the flesh, God, sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit." "For the law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made us free from the law of sin and death." "If we walk in the Spirit, we shall not fulfil the lusts of the flesh."

The secret of victory is the profound consciousness of our utter inability and helpless nothingness. Our insufficiency is measured by His all-sufficiency, and as we decrease, He must increase. Most of our failures are meant to teach us our inability and worthlessness, that we may learn that apart from Him we can do nothing.

GOD'S FAITHFULNESS

4. The review of God's faithfulness and grace is fitted to establish us and encourage us in fidelity and steadfastness. Joshua led them back over the history of the past, and recalled to their mind the marvelous dealings of Jehovah with them and their fathers and then reminded them of the good land into which He had brought them, and all the blessings with which He had surrounded them, and by all these considerations He called them and bound them to remember their covenant obligations, and be true to their faithful God.

And so, God holds us to Himself by the memory of His grace and love. What marvelous promises He has given us, and how vast are the prospects and the recompenses that He has in store for us! By all these things, let us be true to our covenant and faithful to our heavenly Friend.

God would awaken us to a sense of our true dignity and our glorious future, that we might "walk worthy of our high vocation." Behind us there lies a high and heavenly calling and a past full of His faithful love. Before us is a kingdom of incomparable and everlasting glory, and both are calling us to be "steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as we know that our labor is not in vain in the Lord."

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