

# Is holiness really sustainable?

Joshua 23-24

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I recently heard about one well-known Christian writer and pastor who, on Instagram, in July, announced that he was leaving his marriage and —nine days later— that he no longer even considered himself a Christian. More recently I heard of a pastor, who was also the leader of a whole network of churches, admit to an ongoing adulterous affair, leaving thousands of churchgoers in his wake. I am always saddened and humbled when I hear these stories. If it were not for the grace of God, any of us could fall to sin. We all have our struggles with sin and temptation. You and I are familiar with our own habitual sins and inner struggles. Maybe yours is with pornography, gambling, alcohol, pride, worry, anger, gossip, greed, lust, people pleasing, or just plain selfishness. We hear the words of scripture saying, *“Be holy as I am holy”*, but then we think of our lives and wonder if this is even possible.

It brings us to an important question. Is holiness really sustainable? Is it really possible to keep living a God-honoring life day after day, month after month, year after year?

In Joshua 23-24, we find much of the same struggle for the people of Israel. Joshua’s life was coming to an end, so he called the leaders of Israel to meet with him and to give his final words.

By this time the Lord had given rest to Israel from all their surrounding enemies. God had promised the land and provided all the resources that were needed to conquer it for Israel.

The people had seen all that God had done to bring the victory, for it was the Lord who had fought for them and brought the victory. In one battle, God had brought hail that killed even more of the enemy than the army did. In another case, God brought hornets to assist Israel in battle. In yet another battle, God put fear in the heart of the enemy causing them to flee. The strength of God was so present with Israel that it was said, *“One man of you puts to flight a thousand, since it is the LORD your God who fights for you, just as He promised you.”* (Joshua 23:10)

It provides us with a very clear picture of the partnership between man and God. In the moment the soldiers of Israel would have been fighting with all their might, but the victories were so unlikely that God was the only one who could take the credit. God had given the enemy into the hands of Israel, yet Israel still had to march around Jericho, ambush Ai, and take up arms against the enemy.

God had promised that no one would be able to stand against them . . . but that was only as long as they walked faithfully with God.

Much of the Promised Land was conquered, but the Canaanites had not totally been driven out. That was the task that Joshua left to the next generation. Joshua told them how God would push them back and drive them out of their sight. They would possess the land the Lord had promised. Joshua instructed them to be strong, to do all that was written in the Book of the Law of Moses, and to not turn away and mix with these pagan peoples or worship their gods. If they turned back and mixed with the people of the land, then the Lord would no longer drive out the people of Canaan, and the remaining Canaanites would become *“a snare and a trap for you, a whip on your sides and thorns in your eyes, until you perish from off this good ground that the LORD your God has given you.”*

Joshua reminded them how *“not one word had failed of all the good things that the LORD your God promised concerning you”*. But they had to beware, because just as God had fought for them as they walked with Him, if they turned and served other gods, God would turn against them.

Joshua then called all the people of Israel to a commitment. *“Choose this day whom you will serve (...) But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.”* (Joshua 24:15)

The people claimed allegiance to Yahweh that day, but history tells us what eventually happened.

In Judges 2:7,10 we find these interesting verses: *“And the people served the LORD all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua, who had seen all the great work that the LORD had done for Israel (...) And all that generation also were gathered to their fathers. And there arose another generation after them who did not know the LORD or the work that he had done for Israel.”*

They did not drive out the Canaanites. In these lands that were not totally devoted to destruction, the remaining Canaanites proved to be stumbling blocks that eventually would lead Israel into temptation, idol worship, to destruction and exile. It would eventually be said of Israel that their sin became worse than even the pagan Canaanites who had inhabited the land before them.

This should be a reminder for us. It was those who had firsthand experience with God that remained faithful, but the later generations, who had only heard the stories of God, but had not experienced them, turned away from God.

As we raise our children or seek to disciple others, may we not limit their exposure to merely stories of our faith, but may we usher them into the presence of God, into their own, first-hand, relationship with God, where it becomes their faith that will last for a lifetime and be passed on to generations to come.

The following verses, in Judges 2, continue the story of what happened to the following generations:

*“<sup>11</sup> And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD and served the Baals. <sup>12</sup> And they abandoned the LORD, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt. They went after other gods, from among the gods of the peoples who were around them, and bowed down to them. And they provoked the LORD to anger. <sup>13</sup> They abandoned the LORD and served the Baals and the Ashtaroth. <sup>14</sup> So the anger of the LORD was*

*kindled against Israel, and he gave them over to plunderers, who plundered them. And he sold them into the hand of their surrounding enemies, so that they could no longer withstand their enemies.<sup>15</sup> Whenever they marched out, the hand of the LORD was against them for harm, as the LORD had warned, and as the LORD had sworn to them. And they were in terrible distress.”*

How had they arrived at this point? Things had gone so well as they followed God. No opposing army could stand against them. God was fulfilling His promise to give them this land flowing with milk and honey. And now here they were, plundered, surrounded, powerless, in terrible distress, and the hand of the Lord was against them. How had it gone so wrong?

In Judges 2:20-22, we find our answer: *“Because this people have transgressed my covenant that I commanded their fathers and have not obeyed my voice,<sup>21</sup> I will no longer drive out before them any of the nations that Joshua left when he died,<sup>22</sup> in order to test Israel by them, whether they will take care to walk in the way of the LORD as their fathers did, or not.”*

Because of their sin, they no longer walked in the power of God. When faced with challenges, they could no longer overcome their pagan enemies on their own. Each tribe had been assigned land, as theirs, but they either would not or could not drive out the remaining pagan inhabitants. Judges 1 records: *“<sup>27</sup> Manasseh did not drive out the inhabitants of Beth-shean . . . <sup>29</sup> And Ephraim did not drive out the Canaanites who lived in Gezer . . . <sup>30</sup> Zebulun did not drive out the inhabitants of Kitron . . . <sup>31</sup> Asher did not drive out the inhabitants of Acco . . . <sup>33</sup> Naphtali did not drive out the inhabitants of Beth-shemesh . . . <sup>34</sup> The Amorites pressed the people of Dan back into the hill country, for they did not allow them to come down to the plain.”*

They had had a good leader, a good land, all their needs were met, but still they traded in holiness for sin. They did not have it in them to continue in holiness.

We see God working throughout the story of Israel, but through the years the people of Israel were never able to walk in holiness for an extended amount of time. We get to the end of the Old Testament with an unkept promise. From Abraham was to come a people who would be a blessing to the nations, but yet it had never come to fruition.

Then the babe is born in the manger. Holiness in the flesh. Jesus of Nazareth does not sin and willingly lays down his life, taking our sinfulness upon Himself so that we could take His righteousness upon us (2 Corinthians 5:21). He pays the penalty for our sin and is raised from the dead on the third day. For all who turn from their sin and put their faith in Jesus Christ they are forgiven and reconciled to God.

Holiness is now not just possible, it is our identity, it is our nature. We are a new creation. While the world around us and the flesh that holds us, both continue to tempt us to sin, the Spirit of Christ who now lives within us provides us with everything that we need for holiness.

In Christ we are counted as holy and through Christ we are being transformed to live in holiness. While we at times give in to sin, our confidence is that *“He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.”* (Philippians 1:6)

In the story of Israel we see our spiritual journey as well. We, like they, have been freed from slavery. They were freed from the slavery of Egypt; we have been freed from the slavery of sin. Though free, we, too, must walk through a spiritual wilderness to learn what it means to live in the joy and the responsibility of the freedom found in Christ. As we grow in Christ, we begin to truly experience the promised life that God has prepared for us. Like the story of Israel, it is a partnership of the work of man in the midst of the work of God. We are working out our salvation with fear and trembling, but looking back we see that it was God who was working in and through us the whole time, to will and to act according to His purpose. As we walk faithfully with Him, more and more areas of our lives begin to be freed from sin and to live under the lordship of Christ. As we walk in His presence and abide in Him, we have all we need to drive out the idols of our hearts and to walk in holiness. Yes, there will always be areas of our lives that need more of Christ, but as we continue to repent and believe, we will walk in submission to the Holy Spirit who lives in us. He is the One who will work all things for our good as He makes us like Jesus.

In Joshua 24:13, we see that God gave a great gift to Israel in the Promised Land. God gave them a land on which they had not labored and cities that they had not built, and they dwelt in them. They ate the fruit of vineyards and olive orchards that they did not plant. It was all a gift more than they could have ever asked or imagined. Salvation in Christ Jesus is our Promised Land. God has given us the riches of the kingdom. Ephesians 2:8-9 says, ***“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.”*** Jesus came so that we may have life and have it more abundantly (John 10:10).

But then we are reminded of the eventual story of Israel. This is where the analogy parts ways. Even after returning from exile, the children of Abraham were never able to walk consistently in the faith of Abraham. That was and is the promise of the Messiah. He came to do in us what we would never be able to do for ourselves. No matter how many times we recommit ourselves to ***“choosing this day whom we will serve”***, we will not and cannot walk faithfully with God in our own power.

With this in mind, may we heed the advice of Hebrews 12:1-2: ***“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.”***

As Israel was commanded to remove all idol worship from the land, we, too, are commanded to throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles us. That is our part in holiness, but the way it becomes possible is through our identity in Christ and our fixing our eyes on Jesus, who is the author and perfecter of our faith. We are holy and are being made holy. It is God who guarantees to work all things for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose . . . to be conformed to the image of his Son. At times it will be through suffering. At times God will discipline us. At times God will convict us. At times God will grant us more faith, or love or even peace, but it is God through Christ who will bring about holiness in our lives. We no longer need to work to bring about holiness through our own will power. For we who have been granted holiness, our role is to now walk in submission, as Christ does the work in us.

As a patient submits to the surgeon’s scalpel. As the stone submits to the sculptor’s chisel. As the sailor submits to the current of the wind. As the clay submits to the potter’s hand . . . We who are holy will be purified, refined, transformed and shaped into vessels readied for His holy purposes.

### Discussion questions:

1. What in this sermon was most interesting to you?
2. What makes it so difficult to live a holy life?
3. As a group, summarize what Joshua talked about in his final words to Israel and what happened in the years that followed.
4. How does life in Christ make it more possible to live in holiness?
5. How is the story of Israel similar to our journey of faith as Christians?
6. In Hebrews 12:1-2, what is our responsibility and how is Christ involved in our being holy?
7. What do you need to remember from this sermon?
8. What do you need to do about that?
9. How can we pray for you?