

Day 10 – Feb. 10

Final speeches are usually considered some of the most important words a person speaks. In this final speech from Joshua to his people, we find not only yet another summary of their history so far, not only instructions for how they are to move forward, but some important charges to Israel to which we should pay special attention, for with understanding, these charges are for us as well.

I say “with understanding” because we have to be wise and discerning as we read thousand-year-old texts and try to apply them to ourselves today. The world has changed, and while some are timeless, some are not, and it takes a lifetime of prayer and thought to distinguish the two.

For example, “make sure you do not associate with the other people” has been used as a rallying cry to separate the Church from the world. Yet Jesus not only associated with non-Israelites, He called us as his followers to do the same, to share the Good News to All Nations. It can be dangerous to take a phrase like this and simply apply it to our own lives – it can even lead to disobedience to Jesus’ call.

On the other hand, in the same paragraph Joshua calls his people to “cling tightly to the Lord your God,” important words for us all. In fact, I’ve called people to do just that this very week as they face difficulties and trials in their lives. When we face hardships, grief, anxiety, or pain, this command becomes a promise for us, that we can cling tightly to God and find solace.

So there isn’t a simple answer on either side – neither “this text is time-bound and so not to be applied directly” nor “we need to do exactly what this says without discernment about cultural, historical, or geographical changes”. And I hear both of these sentiments used on almost a weekly basis in our world. Following Jesus is not just hard because He asks hard things of us, but because it takes the wisdom of serpents and the innocence of doves to apply the bible wisely.

Just imagine if we took Joshua’s conquest of the Promised Land as a directive or even an example of how Jesus wanted us to live! Yet also imagine if we ignored Joshua’s final call, “choose today whom you will serve” as just a Middle Eastern thing, or just a 15th century BC thing, or just an Old Testament thing. This is why we do our theology in community, because doing theology alone can be terribly dangerous. And we’re seeing the results of that danger all over Christendom today.