

Joshua 23:16

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

When ye have transgressed the covenant of the LORD your God, which he commanded you, and have gone and served other gods, and bowed yourselves to them; then shall the anger of the LORD be kindled against you, and ye shall perish quickly from off the good land which he hath given unto you.

Analysis

When ye have transgressed the covenant of the LORD your God, which he commanded you, and have gone and served other gods, and bowed yourselves to them; then shall the anger of the LORD be kindled against you, and ye shall perish quickly from off the good land which he hath given unto you. This solemn warning from Joshua's farewell address articulates the covenant structure that governed Israel's relationship with Yahweh. The Hebrew verb *avar* (עָבַר, "transgressed") means to pass over or cross a boundary, depicting covenant violation as crossing a sacred line God has established.

The progression outlined is severe but clear: covenant transgression leads to idolatry ("served other gods"), idolatry leads to worship ("bowed yourselves"), worship leads to divine judgment ("anger of the LORD kindled"), and judgment results in exile ("perish quickly from off the good land"). The phrase "anger of the LORD" (אַף־יְהוָה, *af-YHWH*) literally means "the nose of the LORD," a Hebrew idiom for fierce anger. This anthropomorphic language conveys the intensity of God's holy response to covenant betrayal.

Theologically, this verse establishes that Israel's tenure in the promised land was conditional upon covenant faithfulness. Unlike unconditional promises to the

patriarchs regarding ultimate possession, each generation's enjoyment of the land depended on obedience. This combines God's sovereign grace (giving the land) with human responsibility (maintaining covenant loyalty). The warning proved tragically prophetic—both the Northern Kingdom (722 BCE) and Judah (586 BCE) experienced exile precisely as Joshua predicted. This demonstrates that God's warnings are not idle threats but faithful revelations of moral cause and effect in a covenant relationship.

Historical Context

This verse comes from Joshua's final address to Israel's leaders near the end of his life (circa 1390-1370 BCE), delivered at Shechem. Joshua, having led Israel through the conquest and settlement of Canaan, now charges the next generation with maintaining covenant faithfulness. The historical context is crucial: Israel stood at a crossroads between the God who had delivered them and the Canaanite deities whose worship permeated the land they now occupied.

The warning against serving "other gods" addressed the immediate reality of Canaanite religion. Archaeological discoveries from sites like Hazor, Megiddo, and Lachish reveal extensive evidence of Baal worship, Asherah poles, and fertility cult practices. These religions promised agricultural abundance, military victory, and sexual pleasure—powerful temptations for a recently settled people dependent on farming. The high places, sacred groves, and ritual prostitution of Canaanite worship directly contradicted Yahweh's commands.

The subsequent biblical history tragically validates Joshua's warning. The Book of Judges records repeated cycles of apostasy, oppression, and deliverance. Later, the divided monarchy saw systematic idolatry, culminating in the Assyrian conquest of Israel and Babylonian exile of Judah—both explicitly attributed to covenant unfaithfulness and idolatry (2 Kings 17:7-23; 2 Kings 21:10-15). Joshua's prophecy thus stands as a sobering testimony to God's justice and the serious consequences of abandoning covenant loyalty.

Related Passages

Romans 10:9 — Confession and belief for salvation

Ephesians 2:8 — Salvation by grace through faith

Study Questions

1. How does this warning about covenant transgression and its consequences inform our understanding of God's holiness and justice?
2. What parallels exist between Israel's temptation to adopt Canaanite gods and contemporary pressures to compromise Christian distinctiveness?
3. In what ways does this passage help us understand the relationship between God's unconditional promises and conditional blessings?
4. How should the historical fulfillment of Joshua's warning (in the exiles) shape our approach to biblical prophecy and God's Word?
5. What does this verse teach us about the connection between worship (who/ what we bow to) and our ultimate destiny or inheritance?

Interlinear Text

בְּעֲבֹרְכֶם	אֶת	בְּרִית	יְהוָה	אֱלֹהֵי יִם	אֲשֶׁר
When ye have transgressed	H853	the covenant	of the LORD	gods	H834
H5674		H1285	H3068	H430	
צִוָּה	אֶתְכֶם	וְהִלַּכְתֶּם	וַעֲבַדְתֶּם	אֱלֹהֵי יִם	
which he commanded	H853	you and have gone	and served	gods	
H6680		H1980	H5647	H430	
יִסְכַּח ה'	לֶהֱמִי	וְהִשְׁתַּחֲוִיתֶם	אֲחֵרֵי יִם		
other	and bowed	be kindled			
H312	H7812	H1992	H2734		
אֲנִי	יְהוָה	בְּכֶם			
yourselves to them then shall the anger	of the LORD				
H639	H3068	H0			
וְאֲבַדְתֶּם	מְהֵרָה	מֵעַל	הָאָרֶץ	הַטּוֹבָה	
against you and ye shall perish	quickly	H5921	land	from off the good	
H6	H4120		H776	H2896	
אֲשֶׁר	נָתַן	לָכֶם:			
H834	which he hath given	H0			
	H5414				