

Renewal of the Covenant

Joshua 24

At the end of the book of Joshua we read of the ceremony in which Joshua led a renewal of the covenant between Israel and God. In this ceremony Joshua challenged the people to commit themselves to God and to forsake other gods. The ceremony was held at Shechem, a place of some significance for the people of Israel, because of the actions of their ancestors at this place, actions which had a direct bearing on what Joshua said to them, and the response they were challenged to make.

At this stage in their history, the people of Israel had finished their wanderings in the wilderness, they had entered the land of Canaan and had taken up residence there. The Canaanite inhabitants had been defeated, and they were living in peace. Now that they were established, Joshua called the leaders of the people together and confirmed them in their inheritance by a covenant renewal ceremony. This ceremony was also Joshua's farewell to them, for shortly after this ceremony he died and was buried in the land of his inheritance.

When all the elders, leaders, judges and officials had obeyed the summons and presented themselves before God at Shechem, Joshua spoke for a long time to them, recounting their history and reminding them of the many great acts of God on their behalf, the promises that had been fulfilled, and the promises which God had given them for the future. Joshua reminded them of how God had brought their ancestor Abraham out of an idolatrous nation, leading him into Canaan which he was promised as his inheritance. There the descendants of Abraham grew in number, and eventually went into Egypt as guests of Pharaoh during the famine, when Joseph ruled in Egypt. After being reduced to slavery under a later Pharaoh, and being in bondage for many years, God delivered his people with many miraculous deeds. Then Moses led the people out of Egypt and through the wilderness for forty years. After the death of Moses, Joshua had brought the people into Canaan and saw them settled in their inheritance. They had not conquered the land; the Lord had put their enemies to flight from them. They now lived in houses they had not built, ate from vineyards and olive trees and fields they had not planted. It had been the Lord who had given them all these things.

When Joshua gathered the people, the first thing he told them was not that they should be faithful, but that God had given them this land. Our Christian faith is based not on what we have done, but on what

God has done for us in Christ, in real historical events. So too with the Israelites: their faith was rooted not in some abstract doctrine or belief about God, but in what God had done for them. The Ten Commandments are a good example of this. Can you recall how they begin? “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me.” So often we take the Ten Commandments out of context, and consider them simply as a moral code, one that we should encourage people to live by, a set of rules that if followed will produce a decent and clean-living society. But this is to distort and mis-use the Ten Commandments. We seem to think that all it takes is for us to follow these rules, and all will be well. But God is not in the business of giving us instructions as to how to have what we consider to be a decent, respectable society. God is rather instructing us in what we must do if we are to live in a way which is pleasing to him. The Ten Commandments are anything but a moral code for everyone to live by, something we can somehow expect the unbelievers to follow. The Ten Commandments are a Covenant, a binding agreement, a pledge of allegiance, a commitment, made between God and his believing people whom he has redeemed!

Unless we start with God’s act of redemption, that which reconciles us to God and brings us into new obedience to him, then all the emphasis we place on the Ten Commandments will have absolutely no effect whatsoever. Even if it does produce a more moral society, all we will then have is decent, clean-living, respectable **sinners**, alienated from God and in rebellion against him. We cannot save ourselves, whether by keeping the Ten Commandments or by any other means. We must be saved by God, who made the sacrifice of his own Son to make that possible. Or don’t we really believe that? Was it really unnecessary for Christ to die? Would a campaign to bring back the Ten Commandments have been enough? I don’t think so, and God didn’t either. Christ had to die for a reason, and that is that his death was absolutely, unavoidably **necessary**. There is no other way we could be saved, and if we try to play down the fact that we are all guilty, rebellious sinners, who had to have a blood sacrifice to enable us to be set free from our sin, then we are preaching another gospel, a gospel which will be without effect or value, because it is a gospel that God will not bless or prosper; it is a gospel that is completely and utterly void of credibility or power. Sinners who regret their sin and pledge to live better lives are sinners still, and nothing on earth can ever change that! Only the sacrifice of Christ can set us free from our sin and guilt. Otherwise nothing will be changed.

So then, what Joshua was doing here was not asking the people to pledge themselves to live more

decent lives, to behave themselves better, to be respectable citizens. He was asking them to acknowledge their sin and to renew once again the Covenant with God, a covenant that required blood sacrifices at regular intervals to remind them that they were sinners; sacrifices that ended only with the death of Christ, the one true and sufficient sacrifice that makes all other sacrifices unnecessary and redundant. Thus Joshua called the people to fear the Lord and to serve him with faithfulness.

Who is the Lord they are called to worship? They were not to worship some abstract conception of who God is, but to worship the one who has done all these marvellous things for them. Who is it that we should worship? Not the God represented in doctrine or beliefs about him, but the God who has been present with us in Christ and redeemed us by Christ's own death and resurrection. God does not want us to worship and serve a theological abstraction; he wants us to worship the living God who has lived among us and has been one of us. What we celebrate is not “who God is” but “what God has done for us.” Focusing on “who God is” can lead to deception, because it is possible to fill that conceptualisation of God with any content you like, and the history of Christian theology is evidence enough of that. For instance, God can be seen as “that than which no greater thing can be thought.” Or, we can look to “the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man.” Or, “the sea of faith.” All these abstractions, and many more like them, are simply what people have poured into the empty container of the concept of “God.” Often the way in which we do our theology does not and cannot prevent that from happening.

But when we focus on “what God has done” in history, there is a limit placed around that immediately. We can have no faith in a God who has acted in history unless we know what it is that he has done, and believe that he has so acted! This is why the Christian faith is based around not a set of doctrines, but a story of what has happened. This story of what has happened is fixed for us in Scripture. We may argue about what exactly happened, and whether or not we wish to believe the accounts given, or whether it has any relevance at all for us today. But if we wish to do that, we must confront the actual text of Scripture and the account contained within it. We cannot invent new events and happenings, the way we can invent new concepts of God. The Scriptures are written for us not to present a set of doctrines, a handy compendium of beliefs, a source book for theological statements, but as a story, a narrative, an account of what God has done. Who is the God we worship? The one who has done all these marvellous things. What is it that he has done? The Scriptures tell us the story, and in doing so clearly reveal that no other god has ever done anything like this. Only the God who would love us enough to

do what he has done is worthy of our worship. Only the God who was powerful enough to do what he has done is worthy of our undying commitment and devotion.

So what did Joshua do when he renewed the covenant? He recounted what God had done, and on the basis of what they had learned about God from that, he gave the promise of what God would do for them in the future. But they must believe that the Lord would be with them to strengthen and deliver them. If they decided to make peace with the Canaanites, to look to them for leadership, instruction in agriculture, or technology, or building techniques, they would also come to worship the gods of the Canaanites. Surely Joshua was over-reacting a bit here. After all, can't we learn from others without worshipping their gods? It is not as easy as it looks.

After all, how did the Canaanites see their agriculture? Not as a skill entrusted to them by God, who would bless and prosper their efforts, but as an activity interwoven with various rituals which would ensure fertility; rituals which involved promiscuous and deviant sexual practices. The gods who gave fertility to the soil did so not because of their commitment to the people, but if they could be induced to do so by being stimulated and aroused sexually; because it was the sexuality of the gods which produced fruitful crops. How do you get the gods aroused and induce them to engage in sexual acts? You do this yourselves in the temples and festivals honouring the gods, and hope that they catch the mood and become amorous. So how could the Canaanites teach the Israelites how to raise crops? Only by getting them to engage in corrupt sexual practices based on pagan idol-worship. These immoral sexual practices were considered necessary for survival, essential for successful agriculture. It wasn't simply a matter of "loose living," something that we can tut-tut about in a moralistic manner although no doubt that was involved: after all, if you want to justify your sin what better way than to make it a religious necessity! It was a matter of idolatrous religion: a misconception rooted in the rebellion of the heart as to what the world was like, what our responsibilities were within it, and what sort of God rules over it. If we rebel against God, it is not simply a religious matter, it is a matter of the deepest significance for the whole of our lives. As we can see from this example, rebellion against God leads to a perverted view of the way the world works, and then not just legitimates but actually **requires** sexual immorality to keep the world working. So too today: we live in a society in which sexuality is considered to be such a powerful force that to suppress it, to control it, or to restrain it in any way will lead to the most dire consequences for us all. Free sexual expression, particularly for teenagers, is considered not merely to be normal, but necessary for emotional and psychological health, and thus is

not merely tolerated but openly advocated and encouraged. Thus just like the Canaanites, we have become ensnared by a false god, a power outside our control, that must receive its due sacrifice if it is to be appeased.

Also today, just like the ancient Israelites, we are faced with the problem of how to relate to the pagan culture in which we live, without also imbibing its religious perspective. At the root of the whole of life is our religious commitment: either to the true God, or one of our own concocted and imaginary god-substitutes – our modern idols. Just as Canaanite agriculture was tied up with sexual worship of their pagan gods, so too all the many and varied features of our culture are tied up with the worship of false gods.

The book of Joshua records that throughout the lifetime of Joshua and the elders who came into the land with him, the people of Israel served the Lord. But after their lifetimes, during the time of the judges, Israel was not so faithful, and they often went astray and served the false gods of the Canaanites and Philistines and the other nations round about them. The fact that they had been the recipients of God's many blessings, had been blessed by the fulfillment of his many promises to them, and had many more blessings promised for the future, did not restrain them from going astray. So too with us. We might say that we too are faithful; we serve the Lord and remember his promises, but even in the New Testament there are warnings to God's people not to go astray. The letters of Paul to the Corinthians, the letter to the Romans, and others warn against idolatry: letters written to Christian believers. Surely those who have been redeemed in Christ are not liable to worship idols, are they? Or are they? What does it mean to worship an idol? Do we in fact worship any idols? To answer this all we need to do is consider what it is that makes something an idol.

The essence of idolatry is a religious commitment that we make to whatever it is that we consider to be the origin and the source of the meaning and coherence and significance of everything: the world in which we live, our understanding and experience of it, our self-awareness and self-concept, that which is the origin and the goal of everything that exists, and the purpose, significance and meaning of everything we engage in in life.

What is it that provides the meaning, the coherence, the significance of all that we do; our learning, our working, our playing, our commerce and politics, our agriculture and our industry? Is it the Living God, Creator of all things, the one who has been present with us in Jesus Christ? The one by whose

own death we are saved and made whole? Or is it something else, something that we have concocted, imagined, conceived for ourselves and which we pretend is the source and meaning of all things? That is what it means for something to be an idol: it is our deluded imagining of what it is that gives the meaning, the purpose, the significance we seek as to why we are here, what we are to be doing, what it all means, and how it holds together.

To conceive of ourselves and of the world in any other way than to see that as coming solely from God in Jesus Christ is to worship an idol. To imagine that our learning, our science, our politics, our agriculture and our commerce, our family life and our recreation and sport, derives from any other source than the command of God to us to go out and care for the world on his behalf as his stewards, is to worship an idol. To raise our children, to conduct our lives, to interact with each other, in any way whatsoever, as if we can leave God completely and utterly out of the picture, is to substitute an idol for the true God. If God is not the one to whom we have total and complete allegiance, we will seek to slip in a substitute, for we are created servants, and we must of necessity find someone to serve. In the rebellion of our hearts we long to serve anything, anyone, as long as it is not God. For we can create our own gods in our own image, and use that to justify what it is that we want to do. We can imagine that our gods want us to live in such a way that we will be gratified, satisfied, indulged, coddled and placated all the way to the grave and destruction. What else can we say about Canaanite agriculture? Was this not concocted by a society that wanted to justify sexual licentiousness? Maybe that was the case, we don't know. But we can certainly see that that is the case in our **own** society.

It is easy for us to be mistaken about what it means to worship idols. We do not bow down before carved images of stone or wood or bronze. But that is not what Paul warns against. In Ephesians 5:3 he says: "But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people... For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person – such a man is an **idolater** – has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God." In 1 Corinthians Paul says, "Do not be idolaters... Do not commit sexual immorality... do not test the Lord... do not grumble... Therefore, dear friends, flee from idolatry." Sexual immorality maybe, as we have seen. Testing the Lord? Perhaps this could be the case. But **grumbling**? Why is grumbling a sign of idolatry? Because it indicates greed, the desire to have more of this world's wealth and goods; a lack of gratitude; the attitude which sees meaning, fulfillment and purpose in life in the ownership of material things. In other words, God as the giver of all good things is no longer the giver

of meaning and purpose for life: this is sought instead in the things God made. This is the stark warning of Romans 1: idolatry is to turn from the Creator to worship, to pursue, to acquire, to hanker after the creatures given to us not to possess, not to control and dominate, but to care for, to be stewards of, to be rule over as God rules over us: with love, compassion, and provision. And so, the first letter of John concludes with the ominous words, “Little children, keep yourselves from idols.”

This is not an outdated, irrelevant, redundant warning to us: we are as prone to idolatry as those first Christians, as the people of Israel. They were surrounded by cultures that were wholly given over to the worship and service of false gods, a culture riddled with idols, myths and magic, astrology and witchcraft, superstition, charms and stones with supernatural powers, attempts to manipulate and control natural and supernatural forces by mantras, mirrors, and offerings of flowers; a culture with a morbid fascination with the dead and the demonic, with numerous psychics and clairvoyants, tarot card readers, astrologers and diviners, with spirit guides and experts in channelling, a culture riddled with ridiculous fantasy. In other words, the cultures and societies in which the Israelites and the first Christians found themselves was not unlike the one in which we live today. Most of these pagan and idolatrous customs you can find detailed in the pages of any popular magazine in this country.

But what of the Christians living in such a culture? Are they as prone to the seduction of idolatry as others? Yes, I believe that to be the case, because we do not give careful consideration to the dangers, the presence, the influence of idolatry upon our lives. For idolatry is not simply the explicit worship of carved images of various gods, not to pray and burn incense before a picture of some deity or guru or other entity, but to find in something other than the true and living God, the creator of all that exists, the source of meaning and significance in life. Now modern Western people do not tend to pray to images or pictures of deities, but they still nevertheless worship a whole array of false gods, most of which are tied up with the conduct of our society as a whole. The principal god we have worshipped in the West as been human reason, and it is rationality that is considered to be the only basis on which we should live our lives. That human reason is not rooted in God’s wisdom; it is something that we consider to stand on its own: it is the basis on which we can make decisions about our lives without any reference whatsoever to God or his revelation to us or his acts of redemption in history. So, our political life, our commerce, our education system, our science, our medical treatments, whatever you care to think of, must above all else be “rational” if it is to be acceptable to us.

Why is our commitment to “reason” idolatrous? Surely we should all be “reasonable” and “rational”

people, open to persuasion by sound argument and logical thinking. Yes, that is the case, we should be able to be persuaded in appropriate ways. But that is not what makes our commitment to “reason” idolatrous. It is that we see in “reason” the true source of purpose and meaning and significance for everything in life. If something is not “rational,” then it is not true. In other words, if it does not conform to the requirements of rationality then it is not worth considering. What are the requirements of rationality? They are standards that have been established by rational, clear-thinking people, people who see rational thought as the highest achievement that human life can attain. Rational, clear-thinking, rebellious, sinful people, whose thinking has been darkened, and whose reasoning has been corrupted, by the fact that they have discarded the wisdom of the living God, and turned instead to their own minds to tell them what life is all about. For several hundred years we have seen the project of “modernity” advocated as the path to human progress and achievement. Now, this project is unravelling as a result of the internal inconsistencies and difficulties involved in maintaining “rationality” as the basis for all of human life. Now, we are entering a phase where other features of human life are being advocated as the supreme standard for human life, and we are rapidly being seduced by the “irrational” project of post-modernism.

What can Christians do in this situation? Without a careful examination of their own religious commitment, without a return to the Living God as the only source of wisdom, knowledge and authority, we can only vainly battle against the currents of our rapidly disintegrating culture, currents which sweep us first this way and then that. Unless we are prepared to face up to our own sins, our own idolatries, our own rebellion against God, we cannot in any way do battle with the spiritual forces that are waging war in our day and age. And that requires repentance and new obedience to God, an obedience that seeks only to serve him in everything that we do. We are not called to serve God on the side, to acknowledge him within the confines of our Sunday services when it is safe and congenial to do so. We are called to serve God even when, in fact especially when it brings us into conflict with the world outside. We are not isolated from the world we live in; we have pretended that we are, in the illusion that this is what it means for us to be “separate” from the world as the Bible instructs us. But to be separate is not to shut ourselves off somewhere and hide; it means to be different, to be distinctive, to be unique and indisputably Christian in all that we do.

What does that mean in real terms? It means that, when we engage in political life, in commerce, in agriculture, in construction of roads and buildings, in writing novels and computer programmes, in

education, in caring for the sick, the elderly, the impoverished and the infirm, no matter what it is that we are up to, that always and in everything it is the wisdom of God that guides us, and that it is his call on our lives to serve him in caring for the earth, as obedient stewards, forsaking the ways of the idolaters and rebels, that provides the direction, the meaning, the significance, the purpose for what it is that we do. Anything else, anything less, anything other than that is mere window-dressing and deceit that will be revealed as empty and vain on that great Day when all our hearts are judged by the True God.

Joshua placed before the people a choice: God had blessed the people with the land they had been given. Now the Lord demanded a response from them: would they continue to serve the Lord, or would they turn away from him to serve idols of wood and stone? Joshua announced his intention to serve the Lord, and challenged the people of Israel to do the same. Would they worship the Lord, or would they turn away from the Lord to worship the gods their ancestors had worshipped in Mesopotamia and in Egypt; or the gods of the nations among whom they lived. Why did Joshua mention the gods worshipped in Mesopotamia? Well, here they were at Shechem, and there Jacob had purified his family before going to Bethel to build an altar to God. How had he purified his family? By burying the pagan gods they used to worship under the oak. What was the significance of Joshua's speech? If the people of Israel had decided to worship the gods of their forefather Jacob and his family, they could simply dig them up there and then! It was not an idle suggestion, here they were on the spot, with the pagan gods buried under the ground nearby. Why not dig them up? Surely if they had been good enough for Jacob's family, they were good enough for their descendants. What about the gods of Egypt? Well it was not that long ago that they had worshipped Egyptian gods; and not only worshipped them, had actually made themselves one. They had made the golden calf they worshipped at Sinai, an image of an Egyptian god. Some of them were probably old enough to remember what it looked like. The adults of that generation, everyone over twenty years old, had died in the wilderness, but no doubt some of those who had been under twenty were still alive that day. What about the gods of the Amorites? No problem there, just go to any of the local towns and buy some images of the gods in the local market. So Joshua was not presenting them with an unusual or difficult exercise: it could be easily done. But what of the significance of these choices? Surely they would not reject the Lord and choose to worship idols?

It is important to remember that what we have here, and in many other similar instances in the Bible, is not a challenge to exercise a free choice, free will if you like. Joshua was not presenting them with a

range of options, a smorgasbord of religion, a set of alternatives, any of which would serve as good as another. God never places us in the position of having such a free choice: we are to serve God, and God alone. Period. No ifs, no buts, no maybes. The choice is simple: serve God or die! It has not changed since that first decision in the garden of Eden. There too there was no range of options, no equal alternatives. There too it was simple: serve God or die! They chose death. How could they do such a thing? In the face of such an option, why choose the way that leads to death? But they did, and we have had to live with the consequences ever since. Now we too have a choice: to serve God, or to die. What is the alternative, if we do not serve God? Because God created us to respond to him in love, obedience and worship, to serve him and carry out his commands, we cannot do anything but serve. We are servants, God's servants, created to fulfill the task appointed for us, to care for and nurture the earth and its creatures in stewardly ways.

But because we are created servants of God, brought into being as stewards of his creation, we cannot be anything other than servants, nor do anything other than take charge of his creation. Because we are all sinners against God, rebels against our rightful Lord, we must therefore choose something else which we will serve. We cannot decide to be our own masters, to serve only ourselves: we must because of the way we are created, serve something outside ourselves; we must, because of what God made us for, take charge of the creation entrusted to us as stewards. But instead of caring for the creation in stewardly ways, we have instead exploited and plundered it; polluted and befouled it. We have not behaved as obedient servants, honourable stewards, responsible before God for all that we do. We have instead chosen to go our own way, turning our backs on the Lord and Creator of all that is. We have cherished the bizarre illusion that we can instead decide for ourselves what we will accept as right and wrong; what we will do with the creation, what we will worship as god, and a host of other ludicrous and conceited beliefs.

To see just where we have gone wrong, and how we ended up in this crazy situation, let us return briefly to what we know of ourselves. God made us his stewards: called into being so as to take charge of the creation in submission to God, the rightful Lord of all that exists. We are called to follow his commands; given clear instructions on what we can and cannot do. We have been given full freedom to go ahead and make what we wish of the creation **within those guidelines**. So what did we do instead of this? We decided that we would rather make up our own rules; we would rather do something else than care for the creation, we would rather exploit and pillage and steal instead of caring for what God

made; we would rather take it over for ourselves instead of being accountable to God as the only rightful owner of all that is. We have decided that we know better as to what is right and wrong, and have gone ahead and invented our own rules for living. To top it all off, we then decided that we knew better than God as to what God wanted in the way of worship. We knew better than God as to what God was like; we knew better than God as to who was God and who or what should be worshipped. Even though we have now been brought back to God in reconciliation, we still often think that we know better than God as to why we are here, what we should be doing, and what it means to be faithful and obedient Christians. It is taking a long, long time for God to get through to us one simple, basic message that somehow we don't seem to grasp very quickly if at all: that message is simply this: **Jesus Christ is Lord**. In other words, **He is in charge**. He makes the decisions. He gives the commands. He teaches us right from wrong. He knows best. But instead of acknowledging that all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Jesus Christ, we insist on going ahead in our own way; deciding on the basis of our own opinions what is right and what is wrong. We still have a reverence for the rightness of everyone's opinions, the right of everyone to hold their own opinions, the right of everyone to have their opinions given due respect and consideration, regardless of whether they are Biblical, or wise, or sensible, or whether they are stupid, ill-considered, ignorant and absurd.

We Christians are no better than the unbelievers when it comes to maintaining the rightness of our own beliefs. No wonder then that the church has proven itself so incapable of confronting and dealing with the issues of the day. No wonder we cannot make any impression on the world, because anything we try to say about what it means to serve God as he would have us to serve him, is contradicted, confounded, or refuted by someone else who claims to have a better idea about what it means to worship God, a more pleasing view of right and wrong, a less demanding or less challenging view of how to live the Christian life. Yet we are often unable to discern where the problem lies! How do we resolve these conflicts? How do we decide what is right and wrong? There is no way we can possibly achieve any significant impact on an unbelieving world as long as we are pandering to their most basic sin: we soften the gospel to the point that it is possible to serve God without abandoning our most fundamental rebellion against God: the claim that we know best, we are the arbiters of right and wrong, we will decide on our own what truth is.

What is the nature of idolatry? It is deciding for ourselves what god is like. It is rebellion against the true God, and the conceit that we can live our lives as we want to. This then gives us a basis for

confronting the world with the gospel: God has commanded everyone everywhere to repent and believe the good news. Why should we repent? Because it is offensive to God that we continue in our rebellion against him. What are the consequences if we do not repent? We will most certainly be destroyed. What does it mean to repent? To abandon rebellion against God and to acknowledge that he alone is the rightful Lord and Master, and that he alone has the power and authority to instruct us on right and wrong, truth and error. To consider that the gospel means anything less than this is to continue in rebellion, deciding for ourselves what it is that God wants of us, and perversely calling people to believe a Gospel which in fact is no gospel at all. The end result of that is that churches are full of believers who do not truly believe, because they have not truly been converted. Conversion is a matter of abandoning our own conceits and accepting that Another has the authority to decide for us what we should believe. God himself will teach the church, through the Scriptures, led by the Holy Spirit, if we are only willing to abandon our own agendas and to follow instead that agenda which God himself has created us for and called us to follow.

That agenda is the care and stewardship of the whole of creation, the richness of God's handiwork, and he has gifted us and called us so that we can work with it, to preserve it, to care for it, to develop it, to make something of it, demonstrating in all that we do that which God made possible with what he brought into being. And through doing this, following the instructions that God has given us, we will display his glory, his power and his majesty before all the powers of heaven and hell, to demonstrate that he alone is God, and that all that exists is solely for his pleasure, his purpose and his glory. Any other agenda, any other conception as to why we are here, what it is that we are to be doing, is a vain and misguided conceit, the myths and imaginations of a rebellious and sinful heart, that has turned away from its one true Lord to serve some other concocted, trumped-up imitation god - an idol.

The last thing that the book of Joshua records for us was that Joshua, Eleazar and Joseph were buried in the land God had promised to give to the people of Israel. This ends what is possibly the most odd incident of the Exodus. What would be the last thing you would think of packing if you were in a hurry to escape from a land in which you had been enslaved? Probably the last thing we expect to find Israel packing as well: a coffin, with the body of someone who had been dead for about four hundred years! Not just a body, but a genuine, original Egyptian mummy! Joseph's dying request was that his body be taken back to Canaan to be buried. His body was embalmed and placed in a coffin. In Exodus 13 we read that Moses took the coffin with him and this was carried throughout the forty years of Israel's

wanderings in the desert. Thus they were fulfilling the promise given to Joseph that his bones would be buried in the land that God had promised to give the people of Israel. By taking that coffin with them, they were expressing confidence that God would indeed lead them into that land where Joseph could at last be buried. It was a visible and concrete reminder not just to the Israelites but also to God, that he has promised to give them that land, and Joseph could not be buried until they were in the land.

But why was it so important to Joseph to be buried in the land? Joseph wanted, along with Joshua and Eleazar, to be buried in their inheritance, and by carrying out the promise to Joseph the people of Israel were thereby strengthening the bond between the people and the land, a sign that they would share in that inheritance in the eternal kingdom when God would raise all the faithful dead to participate in eternal life forever in the renewed earth. We should also see the burial of our dead in this light: as a sign of our Biblical hope that one day we too will be raised to bodily life to live again on this earth. That is what the Scripture promises; that is our true and only hope of everlasting life. Many Christians have not sufficiently grasped the significance of the resurrection, and the importance that God places on the body. Do we expect to one day inherit the earth as our inheritance, or do we consider that at death the body is now permanently discarded and of no further use to us? But we should have this hope, that just as our Lord Jesus Christ was raised from the dead, so too all those who are indwelt by his Spirit will also be raised, transformed and glorified along with the whole of creation, to enjoy forever the good creation God has made in the company of God himself, who will come down from heaven to live with us forever on the earth, made new and clean, transformed into a fitting dwelling-place for all the saints and their God. What glory we will share together in the kingdom of God! The burial of believers is a sign of their link with this earth, and the hope that they will once again rise to live on this earth as God's creatures.

So in that hope, the hope of new and everlasting life, we engage in our tasks on this earth, caring for it as the stewards of the living God, waiting for the glorious day when all things, all creatures, everything that God has made, will be set free from sin and transformed to reveal his glory. It is for that task that we were created, and called to serve the Living God: to seek in him alone the wisdom, the power, the direction and the purpose we need for life. For in the Lord we find life, and it is the Lord alone who can give us life. Those who fear him will be blessed by God, and will enjoy the fruits of their labours in his loving service. To him be all praise and majesty forever.