



Before anyone freaks out, let me explain why am I wearing a suit! If this is your first Sunday with us, it's rare that anyone here wears a suit. We are a casual, come-as-you-are church. But, this is my funeral suit. This is the suit you really don't want to see me wear because it usually means someone has died. As a pastor, I do lots of funerals. Honestly, I love doing funerals because most often people are open to talking about spiritual things. And at every funeral I get the incredible opportunity to share about the Good News of Jesus Christ. I get to say things like, "Death is not the end of life, it's only the beginning, we were meant to live forever." I get to talk to hurting people about the hope we have in Jesus Christ.

At funerals I sometimes begin my message by asking a question, "If _____ could be here right now, what would he/she say to us?" For sure the person would say life is short and life is unpredictable; the tragedy in Oakland at the Ghost Ship is the latest reminder of that. Then I'll quote from one of the wisest men who ever lived—King Solomon—who said, "*It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, for death is the destiny of everyone; the living should take this to heart*" (Ecc. 7:2). In other words, we all should be thinking about our final destiny. Truth is, we will all die sooner or later.

What if you could speak at your funeral, what would you say? What would you want people to know? Is there anything you would want people to do? Here's the reality: we are already living our farewell address right now. You are already preparing and saying something about what is most important in your life by how you live. I bring all this up because that's what we see Joshua do at the end of his life. He gathers all the leaders of Israel together (in the next chapter, he gathers everyone else) and gives them the first of two farewell addresses—a living funeral message and his last sermon. After living a long and full life Joshua's greatest concern was not himself but the people he would be leaving and their relationship with the Lord. In his message Joshua does three things: he encourages, he challenges, and he gives a stern warning. Let's look at Joshua 23:1-5.

Joshua Encourages God's People to Remember God's Work

After a long time had passed and the Lord had given Israel rest from all their enemies around them, Joshua, by then a very old man, summoned all Israel—their elders, leaders, judges and officials—and said to them: "I am very old. You

yourself have seen everything the Lord your God has done to all these nations for your sake; it was the Lord your God who fought for you. Remember how I have allotted as an inheritance for your tribes all the land of the nations that remain—the nations I conquered—between the Jordan and the Mediterranean Sea in the west. The Lord your God himself will push them out for your sake. He will drive them out before you, and you will take possession of their land, as the Lord your God promised you.

Isn't it true that we typically pay close attention to successful men and women who have lived life well and have something to tell us? Joshua knows his life is coming to an end and he wants to make sure he finishes strong by telling his leaders and the next generation how to live in the land. Joshua is about 110 years old at this point and close to 20 years have passed from chapter 22 to 23. Israel has settled down in the promised land; they finally have rest and peace from all their enemies but their work isn't finished yet. Joshua's concern is God's people have become complacent and have not yet completed the task of driving out all the inhabitants of the land. Joshua was concerned about the future. There were battles still to be fought and won. But, the battle he was most concerned about was a spiritual one. So, Joshua starts by looking back. He tells the leaders to remember what God has done for them.

It's hard for type A driven leaders to look back and be thankful. We are always thinking about the future and leading our families and organizations to a preferred future. That's what leaders do. But Joshua, the great military and spiritual leader of Israel, encourages his people to first look back and remember who God is and what he has done for them. Typically Joshua talked about what God has done for Israel, now he personalizes it and says, "Look at what God has done for **you**. **You** have seen all God has done! You were there when God stopped the flow of the mighty Jordan River and we all crossed over on dry ground. You were there when we defeated Jericho. You saw how God gave us a second chance to defeat Ai. You saw the sun stand still. You know that the land you now enjoy God gave you. Remember what God has done for you. Remember God fought and will continue to fight for you! The same faithful God who brought us this far will bring us much further yet. What God has done, he will continue to do for you."

In Joshua's farewell speech, he first wants them to remember. Why? Because our natural tendency is to forget. Psalm 103:2 says, *"Praise the Lord, my soul, and forget not all his benefits—"* Remembering God's specific faithfulness protects us from unbelief, from pride, from despair, especially when our faith is tested through trials and suffering and when we are tempted to find other saviors. When we look back we find fresh courage from the past. When we look back, we are encouraged to keep trusting and obeying God in the present. Pastor and scholar David Jackman put it this way, "We look back and see that all the blessings we now enjoy have been God's gracious gift, which makes us realize how dependent we are on him and how much we need to keep trusting him for all we face in the future." It's good to look back and remember.

As we close this year and start a new one, how will you look back and remember? For me, one of the ways I'm looking back is by journaling. I'm not a great journal person; it's more of a discipline for me, but I'm trying because I want to be able to look back and thank God for all the ways he's answered my prayers and all he's brought me through. Maybe you can commit to journaling this new year.

After Joshua encourages God's people to remember God's work, he challenges them to remain faithful to God. Look with me at verses 6-11.

Joshua Challenges God's People to Remain Faithful to God

"Be very strong; be careful to obey all that is written in the Book of the Law of Moses, without turning aside to the right or to the left. Do not associate with these nations that remain among you; do not invoke the names of their gods or swear by them. You must not serve them or bow down to them. But you are to hold fast to the Lord your God, as you have until now.

"The Lord has driven out before you great and powerful nations; to this day no one has been able to withstand you. One of you routs a thousand, because the Lord your God fights for you, just as he promised. So be very careful to love the Lord your God."

It wasn't enough to simply remember who God is and what he has done for Israel. Now, Joshua calls for action. He challenges their faith. He tells them to do three things: obey the Scriptures, hold fast to God, and love God. First, obey the Scriptures. This challenge is not new to Joshua or his people. At the very beginning of the book God gave Joshua the same challenge he is now giving all Israel, *"Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go"* (Josh. 1:7). We've seen in Joshua's life the truth of this charge. Joshua's success was not in his military strategies (even

though he was a great General) or in his great leadership capabilities (although he was a great leader). His source of strength was the Word of God. God told him to "obey it, keep it and meditate on it." God wanted Joshua to be completely immersed in the Word of God because whatever shapes a person's thinking, shapes their behavior and ultimately their life. And we can't obey what we don't know. God wanted a close relationship with Joshua and that relationship would be formed on the written Word of God. And now, Joshua is challenging Israel's leaders with the same message: obey God's Word.

The question is, how do we do it? What is our motivation behind obeying the Scriptures? Joshua tells us two things that will help us read God's Word and obey it. He says, "hold fast to God and love God." That's the key to obedience. The Hebrew word used for "hold fast" is actually the same word used in Genesis 2:24 to talk about marriage, *"That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh."* The word "united" literally means cleave, or hold fast or cling. The idea here is intimacy. In the same way you are loyal, committed, and one with your spouse, be that way with God. Cling to your God. Like two metals melting together forming a new alloy, become one with God.

But that's not all. In order to fully obey God, not only must you cling to him, but you must "Love your God." It seems strange for Joshua to say, "Be very careful to love the Lord your God." But not when you consider how tempting it is to fall in love with the world and all it offers.

So the question really is, do you and I love God more than we love **anything** else? As a follower of Jesus, our greatest aim in life is not to become more religious, but to love God more and more. Hundreds of years later Jesus would say the same thing as Joshua, *"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind."* **This is the first and greatest commandment** (Matt. 22:37-38). That's it. Don't add anything to that.

St. Augustine, one of the most influential theologians from the fourth century said these famous words, "Love God and do as you please." That statement seems irresponsible, even dangerous. Do whatever you want? Are you kidding? But, if you love God, if he is first and foremost in your life, then every decision you make will honor him. You won't be led into habitual sin. This kind of love flows from who God is. The apostle John said, *"We love because he (God) first loved us"* (1 John 4:19). Love is who God is, so if I am not clinging to him I can't love him passionately. If I am not in his Word, the place where he reveals himself to us, then I won't be able to love or obey him. Jesus told us that if we love him, we'll obey him. The way we cling to God and love God is by being devoted to his Word.

Why does Joshua challenge his leaders with these words? Because there will be constant temptation in the land. Because the battle is far from over. Not only is there more land to take but the spiritual battle to remain faithful to God will be even harder. Israel will be tempted to go back to Egypt. Israel will be tempted to be like the other nations. They will be tempted to compromise, to become apathetic and to put their guard down. Joshua challenges them not to do it. And the only way you'll be able to fight is to cling to God and love God by being devoted to his Word.

The same is true for us. Every day we go to work, school, or to the mall, or turn on the TV or look at our smart phones, we face the same temptation. Will we obey the Word or popular culture? Will we hold fast to God or cling to rival gods? Will we love God or love ourselves? As we read and study the Word of God and see all he has done in the past for his people, God gives us fresh faith to face all our problems with courage and confidence. As we are getting close to the New Year, I want to encourage you to find a Bible reading plan and start it on January 1. I've been using the Book of Common Prayer plan on the Youversion Bible App and I love it. In addition, plan this year to read several good Christian books. Listen to good worship music. Subscribe to different pastors' podcasts. Why? To increase your love for God and his Word.

Author Rubinstein, a world famous pianist wrote years ago about the importance of practicing every day: "If I don't practice one day, nobody knows. If I don't practice two days, then I know. But if I don't practice three days, the whole world can tell." The same is so true for my life. I know when I am not in tune with the Lord through his word and others who know me well see it too. I become edgy, mean-spirited and I lose my sense of humor. It all usually starts with missing a few days of devotional time with God. "It's easy for you, you're a pastor!" No, I actually think it's more difficult. What about you? Can people close to you see the difference when you are in God's Word consistently and when you are not? Joshua says, look back and thank God. Look forward and trust God. Love him, cling to him and obey him. Then he finishes his farewell speech with a stern warning about the consequences of disobedience.

Joshua Warns God's People about the Consequences of Disobedience

"But if you turn away and ally yourselves with the survivors of these nations that remain among you and if you intermarry with them and associate with them, then you may be sure that the Lord your God will no longer drive out these nations before you. Instead, they will become snares and traps for you, whips on your backs and thorns in your eyes, until you perish from this good land, which the Lord your God has given you.

"Now I am about to go the way of all the earth. You know with all your heart and soul that not one of all the good promises the Lord your God gave you has failed. Every promise has been fulfilled; not one has failed. But just as all the good things the Lord your God has promised you have come to you, so he will bring on you all the evil thing she has threatened, until the Lord your God has destroyed you from this good land he has given you. If you violate the covenant of the Lord your God, which he commanded you, and go and serve other gods and bow down to them, the Lord's anger will burn against you, and you will quickly perish from the good land he has given you" (verses 12-16).

Joshua warns Israel of two failures: intermarriage and the worship of other gods. He warns them first not to intermarry with pagans. This is not about race or ethnic intermarriage, it's about faith. Joshua is saying, "Don't marry an unbeliever. Don't marry someone who doesn't love and worship God they way you do." Why? Because intermarriage frequently leads to idolatry. All you have to do is look at the history of Israel in the Old Testament and you see why Joshua was so concerned about this problem. In the New Testament, Apostle Paul had the same concern and wrote the church in Corinth about it, *"Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? Or what does a believer have in common with an unbeliever?"* (2 Cor. 6:14-15). I've counseled lots of people who are married to a non-Christian, and they've all told me how hard it is to love someone who doesn't love your God.

Not only does Joshua warn them not to intermarry, he warns them not to worship other gods. He uses strong imagery to explain what will happen if they do intermarry or worship other gods. What initially seems like a blessing will become snares and traps for you, whips on your backs and thorns in your eyes. Joshua is saying those decisions will end up hurting you. So, he is leaving them and us with a choice. Obey God and he will bless you and keep you in the land. Disobey God and he will judge you and remove you from the land. Joshua warned them their disobedience would be gradual. I get the impression that Joshua had that sick feeling that he knew they would eventually fall into idol worship. And sadly, we know the next generation did exactly that. Like the Canaanites, they worshipped idols made of wood and stone. They had sex with temple prostitutes. They offered children to Molech, the god of the underworld. They abandoned God. The entire book of Judges and 1 & 2 Kings talks about this. God eventually allowed Babylon, a foreign nation, to conquer Judah, destroy Jerusalem, and take thousands of Jews into exile in Babylon.

As a new Christian, I remember looking up to some of the other kids in our youth group and thinking, "Wow, maybe one day I'll be on fire for God the way he is." And it wasn't long before several of the guys I admired for their relationship with Christ suddenly stopped walking with God and abandoned the faith all together. I had a close friend in college who did the same thing. Have you ever wondered why people who were once fully devoted to the Lord walk away from God later in life? Some even become hateful of God and all Christians stand for. I don't have all the answers for that. Maybe they were never Christians in the first place. Maybe something so awful happened in their life that it left them disillusioned. I'm not sure. But, what I do know is in most cases, the drift is gradual. It's one bad decision after another. It's one small compromise after another. And I think Joshua was concerned about that and so should we. The big idea of this passage is the conquest is over but the fight is never done.

Like Israel, we face constant temptation to sin and to adapt to culture every day. We may not worship idols made of stone but we worship many idols of the heart. An idol is anything we love more than God. It's anything we look to instead of the Lord for ultimate security.

So money, power, success, possessions, relationships, acceptance, security and comfort are some of the idols we struggle with today. But, unlike Israel, we have the finished work of Jesus

Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit to rely on. God promises that we'll never be tempted beyond what we can bear and he'll always provide a way out (1 Cor 10:13). The Apostle John encouraged the church with the great reminder that he who is in you is greater than the one in the world (1 John 4:4).

Jesus, like Joshua had some famous last words as well. On the cross, in agony, Jesus, the greater Joshua said, "It is finished." Those three words mean all that was needed for salvation and all that was needed to live the Christian life was provided for in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In Christ we find true rest for our souls. In Christ, we don't need to work any harder. He's done all the work for our salvation and our sanctification. It's done. There is nothing more we can do or say to make God love us any more or any less.

So, what would you say at your own funeral? How would you encourage people? How would you challenge people? How would you warn them? For Joshua, he wanted his leaders to know, the conquest is over but the fight is never done. So remember God's work, he fights for you. Stay faithful to God by clinging to him and loving him by being devoted to his Word. And be warned, there will be a constant temptation to worship and follow other gods.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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