



LOOKING BACK WITHOUT TURNING BACK

JOSHUA 24

WAGONS WEST

My father's grandmother was part of a wagon train that crossed the United States in the 1850's. Lacking funds for full ox or horse teams, nearly three thousand immigrants from England, Wales, Scotland and Scandinavia made the journey from Iowa or Nebraska as part of ten handcart companies. For two of the companies, the trek was disastrous, having departed late in the year and then being trapped by heavy snow in Wyoming. But I guess my father's grandmother was not in those groups because she and her family made it far enough to make a new home for their children and grandchildren. We don't talk about that side of the family very much, but I thought about them Friday when I imagined wagon-trains in Hope Valley, preparing to push their teams up the Carson Pass and through the Sierra.

LOOKING BACK

I think it is safe to say that a few times a day those pioneers questioned their own motives and their leadership, and considered turning back to the life they knew, rather than pursuing whatever dream it was that drove them westward. How was it that they could look back without turning back? In the country they left, at least they knew the problems. Ahead was only unimaginable difficulty, and one of those difficulties was Carson Pass, miles of granite and boulders, bears, native Americans, and approaching winter.

I think my journey over Carson Pass is a good prolog to the scripture from Joshua today, and a good prolog to our own question: How to look back without turning back.

THE LAST CHAPTER OF JOSHUA

This last chapter of Joshua is a summary of all that the Hebrews had been through together. Joshua was now fifty years older than he was when he was a warrior, and so he asked: will you be able to go on without me, and will you keep the faith in God that I

taught you ... the God that brought you safe thus far, and upon whom we have relied to lead us safely home.

And so there is this dialog between Joshua and the people in which he reminds them of the hardships they have faced on their journey from Egypt back to their Holy Land, and challenges them to keep the faith.

Repeatedly he challenges them, "Choose this day whom you will serve." As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.

A COVENANT CEREMONY

Our lesson today may have been a renewal of the covenant ceremony from the Hebrews that was part of the sacred life of the earliest tribes and its theme is looking back without turning back.

As we listen we think of pioneers on the trail; we think of victims of hurricanes who must start over, people who have faced diseases and losses who would prefer to look back rather than to look ahead.

PRODUCTIVE ALL OF OUR DAYS

But moving ahead means responding to life's call to remain productive all of our days, and languishing on the trail makes us the certain victims of winter storms and predators. So I think there is something in this lesson for everyone.

JOSHUA 24: THE TRIBES RENEW THE COVENANT

Reader 1

Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel; and they presented themselves before God. And Joshua said to all the people, 'Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Long ago your ancestors—Terah and his sons Abraham and Nahor—lived beyond the Euphrates and served other gods. Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan and made his offspring

many. I gave him Isaac; and to Isaac I gave Jacob and Esau. I gave Esau the hill country of Seir to possess, but Jacob and his children went down to Egypt. Then I sent Moses and Aaron, and I plagued Egypt with what I did in its midst; and afterwards I brought you out. When I brought your ancestors out of Egypt, you came to the sea; and the Egyptians pursued your ancestors with chariots and horsemen to the Red Sea.

Reader 2

When they cried out to the LORD, he put darkness between you and the Egyptians, and made the sea come upon them and cover them; and your eyes saw what I did to Egypt. Afterwards you lived in the wilderness for a long time. Then I brought you to the land of the Amorites, who lived on the other side of the Jordan; they fought with you, and I handed them over to you, and you took possession of their land, and I destroyed them before you.

Reader 1

...I gave you a land on which you had not labored, and towns that you had not built, and you live in them; you eat the fruit of vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant.

'Now therefore revere the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. Now if you are unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.'

Reader 2

Then the people answered, "We will not forsake the LORD to serve other gods; for it is the LORD our God who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight. He protected us along all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed; and the LORD drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land. Therefore we also will serve the LORD, for he is our God.'

Reader 1

But Joshua said to the people, 'You cannot serve the LORD, for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins. If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm, and consume you, after having done you good.'

Reader 2

And the people said to Joshua, 'No, we will serve the LORD!' Then Joshua said to the people, 'You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen

the LORD, to serve him.' And they said, 'We are witnesses.'

Reader 1

Joshua said, 'Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your hearts to the LORD, the God of Israel.'

Reader 2

The people said to Joshua, 'The LORD our God we will serve, and him we will obey.' So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and made statutes and ordinances for them at Shechem.

Reader 1

Joshua wrote these words in the book of the law of God; and he took a large stone, and set it up there under the oak in the sanctuary of the LORD. Joshua said to all the people, 'See, this stone shall be a witness against us; for it has heard all the words of the LORD that he spoke to us; therefore it shall be a witness against you, if you deal falsely with your God.' So Joshua sent the people away to their inheritances.

...

Israel served the LORD all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua and had known all the work that the LORD did for Israel.

HAMLET

**To be or not to be, that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles
And by opposing, end them.**

**To die - to sleep, no more;
And by a sleep to say we end
The heartache and the thousand natural
shocks
That flesh is heir to: 'Tis a consummation
devoutly to be wished. (sometimes)**

Can we raise our spirits knowing that progress means being willing suffer the slings and arrows that result from action? Do we dare to take arms against a sea of troubles?

Or shall we long for sleep, for intellectual detachment, and wallow in prejudice just to replace the heartache of thinking?

Regardless of whether the focus is placed on "life vs. death" or "action vs. no action," the themes tackled by Hamlet's soliloquy (and by Shakespeare's play in general) led to the character of the Danish Prince often getting compared to

existentialists after the term was introduced in the twentieth century. - Wikipedia

WHEN YOU DECIDE WHAT TO DO WITH YOUR LIFE, YOUR DECISIONS BECOME YOUR LIFE. THAT IS EXISTENTIALISM.

- There is an entire generation that has said, “You have to learn to love yourself,” and they are asking, “Why aren’t we happy?”
- Loving yourself is not the greatest love of all.
- Personal comfort is not the measure of success.
- We need to find a purpose bigger than our selves, and a mission that will outlast us.

JOSHUA TEXT

Diane Brown and Ted Crouch read our lesson from Joshua. This is a dialog between Joshua and his people. This chapter is a summary of his life, and a transition of power that provides a major division point in the narrative of the Bible, and the return of the Hebrews to their Holy Land.

CHAPTER 24

The more time I spend with this scripture from Joshua, the more I become convinced that what we have found is an early ceremony from the Hebrews that has been added to that end of the book of Joshua. It is a commissioning ceremony. It is a charge to the faithful. And it is based upon the question, “Who will you serve?”

Frankly, it really doesn’t matter how Joshua’s people answered the question. That has already been decided. Existential means asking how we will respond.

This is a ceremony that is similar, in some ways, to the serving of Holy Communion. Who do you serve? As for me and my family, we will serve the Lord.

The proper use of this chapter seems to be not to preach it but to **do it**.

Let me try to preach it first, and then we’ll see if there is anything for us to do about it in a moment.

LET’S LOOK AT THE STRUCTURE:

First, who was Joshua?

Joshua shared in all the events of the Exodus. He was Moses' apprentice, and accompanied him part of the way when he ascended Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments. Joshua was also one of the twelve spies who were sent on by Moses

to explore the land of Canaan (Numbers 13:16-17), and only he and Caleb gave an encouraging report. He was commander at their first battle after exiting Egypt. Joshua was appointed by Moses to succeed him as leader of the Israelites upon Moses' death.

- **The first** major part of his book is when he commanded the conquest of Canaan. As the Israelites came to the Jordan River, the waters parted, as they did for Moses at the Red Sea. The first major battle was in Jericho, a heavily fortified city just five miles west of the Jordan River. He ordered his men to march around the city for seven days, whereupon the city walls fell, just as God said they would.
- **In the second** main part of his book, Joshua divided the conquered land among the tribes of Israel as dictated to him by God.
- **Then, when he was old and well advanced in years**, Joshua convened the elders and chiefs of the Israelites and exhorted them to have no fellowship with the native population because it could lead them to be unfaithful to God. At a general assembly of the clans at Shechem just prior to his death, he admonished them to be loyal to their God. As a witness of their promise to serve God, Joshua set up a great stone under an oak by the sanctuary of God.

Soon afterward he died, at the age of 110.

AND SO THIS CEREMONY BECAME PART OF THE FAITH

- **What got you here**, and who got you here? Look back at who you are, but do not turn back.
- **What things still excite your spirit?** What would you rather do than eat? What makes you happy? What needs to be done? What will make the world a better place for those who come after you?
- **What are the obstacles?**

"Opportunity is missed by most people because it is dressed in overalls and looks like work." – Thomas Edison

- **Finally, commit yourself to God by overcoming the obstacles.**

WHO ARE YOU MOST HONEST WITH?

What happens when you apply Joshua’s commitment formula to your own life? Imagine that

you are talking with that person with whom you are most honest and truthful. Imagine that you are reviewing these four steps to spiritual commitment that come from Joshua.

- Where did you come from? How was God active in your formulation?
- What still excites you?
- What are the obstacles?
- What does God require of you because of this?

WE PRAY FOR THEM

There are families in Texas who are asking those questions. We pray for them.

There are families who have experienced separation, loss, and profound change. We stand with them.

There are places in the world that lack even the most basic resources. We still have many opportunities to help them.

With every sunrise, we ask how we can look back without turning back.

God will give us the faith and the tenacity to push our handcarts up toward the summit of the pass. Do we have the will to do it?

TODAY IS OUR FESTIVAL OF MINISTRY.

This is a day where we present our choices for education and mission. In Bowen Hall you can find displays about those choices. We can't do everything, but on display are a few of the things we can do. You will be impressed by how much we can do with so little.

If our programs were government programs ... well I think they would be different, and I think that, per capita, there would be fewer of them.

In particular I want to call your attention one more time to the launch of Roses University. We have four interesting programs for adults, four choices for children, and dinner on Sunday night. We have a hope that this concept will grow. ("University" is a bit ambitious.) This is quite a commitment, and we hope that there will be something of interest not only to you, but to a friend of yours who would benefit from a spiritual community like ours. Maybe there is something you will want to teach as well as learn.

- Look at the programs of the women's organization.
- Look at what our mission money is doing.
- Look at the ongoing "Pre-K" program in Preschool.
- Look at the challenges of our Montgomery breakfast program.

We have a history, and we are choosing a future. Service and ministry still excite us. There are obstacles to overcome, and there is money we need to raise. Our hopes are greater than our resources, and we need some extra help and gifts right now to get us back on budget.

But when we look back without turning back, here is what we can say of our church:

- We didn't make very many foolish bargains.
- Joshua is a prototype for Jesus in many ways, and Joshua's challenge to the Hebrews is also Jesus' challenge to the Christians. We remember the God of our ancestors who brought us here.
- We set aside something upon which to grow.
- We remembered our spiritual family.
- We have made sacrifices.
- In our own lifetimes, we renewed the Covenant.

THE LESSON

...(the Lord) gave you a land on which you had not labored, and towns that you had not built, and you live in them; you eat the fruit of vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant.

But I argue with Joshua, by saying that serving the God through our ancestors is not an option.

**Our God lies ahead of us.
The only God you can serve is the one
who lives in your heart right now.**

No, we will not forsake the LORD to serve other gods; for it is the LORD our God who brought us and our ancestors up from the land, and across the prairie and up the mountain pass. Therefore we also will serve the LORD IN OUR OWN DAY, for the Lord is our God.



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