

Joshua 24:1-25
November 12, '17

“ONCE UPON A TIME”

OUR SCRIPTURE READING THIS MORNING IS A LONG ONE...I MEAN REALLY LONG.

IF YOU READ IT THIS WEEK AFTER RECEIVING YOUR NEWSLETTER, YOU KNOW WHAT I MEAN.

EVEN IF YOU JUST LOOKED AT IT IN THE BULLETIN THIS MORNING, YOU KNOW THIS IS A LONG PASSAGE.

IT'S NOT JUST THAT IT'S LONG; IT INCLUDES A LOT OF NAMES THAT YOU'D PROBABLY RATHER NOT HAVE TO WADE THROUGH.

I WILL ALSO TELL YOU THAT, EVEN THOUGH IT'S OUR LECTIONARY OLD TESTAMENT READING FOR TODAY, THE SUGGESTED READING DOESN'T INCLUDE ALL 25 VERSES.

I THINK IT'S THE FIRST 3 ½ VERSES AND THEN VERSES 14-25.

THE ONLY LOGICAL REASON FOR THE OMISSION OF THE OTHERS IS TO MAKE IT SHORTER THAN IT ACTUALLY IS.

I WENT BACK & FORTH AS TO WHETHER TO INCLUDE THE OMITTED VERSES AND, IN FACT, I EVEN CONSIDERED OMITTING SOME OF THE SUGGESTED ONES.

IN THE END, THOUGH, I DECIDED TO INCLUDE ALL 25 VERSES.

I TELL YOU ALL THAT BECAUSE, IF YOU'RE LIKE ME – AND YOU MAY HATE TO ADMIT IT AS MUCH AS I DO – YOU MAY BE INCLINED TO TUNE OUT AT LEAST PART OF THE SCRIPTURE READING.

I WANT TO URGE YOU TO RESIST THAT TEMPTATION THIS MORNING. THIS IS AN IMPORTANT PASSAGE.

IT IS, IN FACT, ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT PASSAGES IN THE ENTIRE OLD TESTAMENT.

IT INCLUDES ONE OF THE MOST WELL-KNOWN VERSES OF THE OLD TESTAMENT.

I'M NOT GOING TO TELL YOU WHAT THAT VERSE IS BUT I TRUST YOU'LL RECOGNIZE IT WHEN WE COME TO IT.

THAT MAY ALSO BE AN INCENTIVE TO REALLY LISTEN TO THE WHOLE THING SO YOU'LL HEAR THAT VERSE WHEN WE COME TO IT.

YOU'LL NOTE THAT THIS IS JOSHUA – THE SUCCESSOR OF MOSES - SPEAKING TO THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL AT A PLACE CALLED SHECHEM WHERE HE HAD PREVIOUSLY GATHERED THE PEOPLE TO MAKE A COVENANT WITH GOD.

HE'S DOING THE SAME THING HERE.

HE KNOWS HE'S NEAR THE END OF HIS LIFE & HE WANTS TO BE SURE THAT THE PEOPLE STAY ON THE RIGHT COURSE FOR THEIR LIVES.

HE ENCOURAGES THEM, HE REMINDS THEM & HE CHALLENGES THEM.

WITHIN THESE VERSES, THOUGH, IT'S NOT JUST JOSHUA WHO IS SPEAKING.

THE VERSES IN THE MIDDLE – IRONICALLY, THE ONES THAT HAVE BEEN OMITTED BY THE LECTIONARY – ARE THE WORDS, NOT OF JOSHUA, BUT OF GOD.

GOD, THROUGH JOSHUA, IS SPEAKING DIRECTLY TO THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL.

GOD IS TELLING STORIES IN THOSE OMITTED VERSES WE'LL READ TODAY.

HE'S TELLING GLORIOUS STORIES OF DAYS GONE BY.

HE'S TELLING “ONCE UPON A TIME” STORIES OF THE WAY THE PEOPLE HAVE ALWAYS HAD GOD RIGHT BY THEIR SIDE THROUGH ALL THE CHALLENGES OF LIFE.

SO HERE WE GO.

TRY TO HANG IN THERE THROUGH ALL 25 VERSES BECAUSE THIS IS REALLY GOOD STUFF!

JOSHUA 24:1-25

(After Scripture)

I REMEMBER TALKING TO SOMEONE WHO DROVE A LOT OF MILES IN HIS WORK.

HE WAS ON THE ROAD ALL DAY, EVERY DAY.

HE SAID HE HAD A TENDENCY TO DRIVE A BIT OVER THE SPEED LIMIT.

HE SAID, *“IT’S NOT ALL THAT MUCH OVER –NEVER MORE THAN 10 MILES OVER – BUT ENOUGH THAT I MIGHT BE TICKETED FOR SPEEDING.”*

HE SAID, *“I USED TO WORRY ABOUT THAT A LOT AND EVEN THOUGH IT DIDN’T CAUSE ME TO SLOW DOWN & KEEP WITHIN THE SPEED LIMIT, I WAS ALWAYS NERVOUS ABOUT GETTING STOPPED.”*

THEN HE SAID SOMETHING I THOUGHT WAS VERY INTERESTING & APPLICABLE TO A LOT OF OTHER AREAS OF LIFE.

HE SAID, *“I FINALLY CAME TO THE REALIZATION THAT EVERY TIME I DRIVE, I PROBABLY DO SOMETHING ILLEGAL.*

MAYBE I’M A BIT OVER THE SPEED LIMIT OR MAYBE I’M TOO CLOSE TO THE CAR IN FRONT OF ME OR MAYBE I FORGET TO USE MY TURN SIGNAL.

I’VE GONE YEARS, THOUGH, WITHOUT BEING TICKETED SO I FIGURE I’M DUE FOR ONE & I WON’T BE UPSET WHEN IT HAPPENS.

I’LL JUST TRY TO THINK OF ALL THOSE TIMES I COULD HAVE BEEN TICKETED & WASN’T.”

I’M NOT SURE IF THAT’S THE BEST ILLUSTRATION ONE MIGHT USE TO MAKE THIS POINT, BUT AREN’T WE ALL – IF WE’RE HONEST – LIKE THAT MAN?

IF THERE WAS A WAY OF MONITORING EVERY SINGLE THING WE DO WHEN WE DRIVE, I IMAGINE WE WOULD ALL SEE THAT WE HAVE

VIOLATED THE STRICT LETTER OF THE LAW IN SOME FASHION, NEARLY EVERY TIME WE GET BEHIND THE WHEEL OF A CAR.

BUT THEN, ON THOSE RARE OCCASIONS WHEN WE GET TICKETED FOR ONE OF THOSE COUNTLESS VIOLATIONS, WE WHINE & MOAN ABOUT IT AS IF WE DIDN'T DESERVE IT!

WHY NOT, INSTEAD, THINK OF THE COUNTLESS TIMES WE *COULD* HAVE BEEN STOPPED & WEREN'T?

OR THINK OF IT IN TERMS OF OUR PHYSICAL HEALTH.

I'VE TOLD YOU BEFORE OF MY EXPERIENCE OF LIVING WITH CONSTANT PAIN FOR A PROLONGED PERIOD OF TIME AS A TEEN-AGER & THINKING TO MYSELF THAT IF I EVER GET OVER THIS, I'LL TRY TO REMEMBER TO BE THANKFUL FOR A PAIN-FREE DAY OF LIFE.

I'D LIKE TO SAY THAT I THINK OF THAT EVERY DAY, BUT I DON'T.

BUT I DO THINK OF IT ENOUGH TO SPEND TIME, ON OCCASION, FOCUSING ON EVERY PART OF MY BODY THAT DOESN'T HURT.

MY NORMAL INCLINATION – AND PERHAPS YOURS – IS TO THINK ONLY OF MY HEALTH WHEN SOMETHING HURTS OR ISN'T RIGHT.

I KNOW THERE ARE THOSE WHO LIVE WITH DAILY, CHRONIC PAIN & THAT IS A HORRIFIC BURDEN.

BUT MOST OF US DON'T.

BUT HOW OFTEN DO YOU STOP LONG ENOUGH TO THINK, “MY HEAD DOESN'T HURT?”

HOW OFTEN DO WE PAUSE & THANK GOD WITH THE REALIZATION THAT, “MY BACK FEELS FINE” OR “I DON'T HAVE A STOMACH ACHE” OR “MY NECK IS PAIN-FREE?”

IT'S ONLY WHEN SOMETHING *DOESN'T* FEEL RIGHT THAT WE THINK ABOUT IT.

LET ME SUGGEST THAT YOU, INSTEAD, THINK ABOUT YOUR HEALTH WHEN IT'S GOOD.

TRUST ME – IT WORKS.

JUST PAUSE OCCASIONALLY – MAYBE DURING YOUR DAILY PRAYER OR DEVOTION TIME – AND START AT YOUR FEET & FOCUS ON THEM AND THEN MOVE UP TO ALL THE OTHER PARTS OF YOUR BODY & GIVE THANKS FOR WHAT *DOESN'T* HURT.

“MY FEET FEEL FINE. MY LEGS, MY KNEES, MY STOMACH, MY RIBS, MY HANDS, MY ARMS, MY BACK, MY NECK, MY FACE, MY EARS, MY HEAD.”

WHY NOT GIVE THANKS TO GOD FOR THE GOOD TIMES RATHER THAN SIMPLY PLEADING FOR HELP WHEN TIMES ARE BAD?

THAT SEEMED, SO OFTEN, TO BE THE PROBLEM THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL EXPERIENCED.

NO MATTER HOW MANY TIMES GOD DELIVERED THEM, OR RESCUED THEM, OR PROTECTED THEM, THEY WERE ALWAYS FOCUSING ON THEIR PROBLEMS & FORGETTING ABOUT GOD’S PROVIDENCE.

BUT NOT HERE – AND THAT’S WHAT MAKES THIS PASSAGE SO IMPORTANT.

THIS IS ONE OF THE FEW TIMES THE PEOPLE GOT IT RIGHT.

GOD, SPEAKING TO THE PEOPLE THROUGH JOSHUA, REMINDS THEM OF THE WAY IN WHICH GOD HAS BEEN WITH THEM THROUGH EVERY ONE OF THEIR TRIALS.

GOD REMINDS THEM OF THE DIVINE LOVE & CARE THAT WALKED BY THEIR SIDE EVERY STEP OF THE WAY IN EVERY DIFFICULT EXPERIENCE THEY ENCOUNTERED.

JOSHUA THEN PRESENTS THEM WITH THE CHOICE THAT STANDS BEFORE THEM: THEY CAN CHOOSE THE TRUE GOD WHO HAS DONE ALL OF THESE MARVELOUS & MIRACULOUS DEEDS ON THEIR BEHALF – OR THEY CAN CHOOSE ONE OF THE OTHER COUNTLESS GODS THAT OTHERS FOLLOW.

IT'S INTERESTING TO NOTE THAT NEITHER JOSHUA NOR GOD IS REALLY CRITICAL OF THOSE OTHER GODS.

NEITHER GOD HIMSELF NOR JOSHUA HAS TO "SELL" THE TRUE GOD TO THE PEOPLE.

THE FACTS SPEAK FOR THEMSELVES.

NONE OF THE GODS OF THIS WORLD ARE GOING TO BE THERE FOR THEM WHEN THEY REALLY NEED HELP.

ONLY THE TRUE GOD – THE GOD OF THEIR ANCESTORS – CAN BE COUNTED ON FOR ANYTHING THAT REALLY MATTERS IN LIFE.

JOSHUA SAYS, IN THAT VERSE THAT WAS SO FAMILIAR TO MOST OF YOU – *"CHOOSE THIS DAY WHOM YOU WILL SERVE....BUT AS FOR ME AND MY HOUSEHOLD, WE WILL SERVE THE LORD."*

AND HERE – UNLIKE SO MANY OTHER PLACES IN THE OLD TESTAMENT – THE PEOPLE IMMEDIATELY JUMP ON BOARD & SHOUT THEIR DECISIVE AGREEMENT WITH JOSHUA.

IT'S A NO-BRAINER!

"OF COURSE WE'LL WORSHIP – WE'LL HONOR – WE'LL SERVE - THE TRUE GOD BECAUSE THIS IS THE ONLY GOD WE CAN COUNT ON WHEN THE CHIPS ARE DOWN."

THEY KNEW THAT GOD HAD BEEN WITH THEIR ANCESTORS IN THE DISTANT PAST & THAT GOD HAD BROUGHT EACH OF *THEM* TO THE PROMISED LAND PRESENT.

IT WOULD BE THE HEIGHT OF FOOLISHNESS TO THEN DECIDE THAT GOD *WOULDN'T* BE THERE IN THE FUTURE.

SO, TOO, FOR US –CORPORATELY & INDIVIDUALLY.

CORPORATELY, GOD HAS WALKED WITH THIS CHURCH FAMILY IN THE PAST.

WE HAVE THAT BOOK THAT SITS IN THE GALLERY – "THE SAINTS OF EASTMINSTER" – AND WE CAN READ THEIR "ONCE UPON A TIME" STORIES

- STORIES OF SO MANY OF THOSE WHO HAVE GONE BEFORE US IN FAITH WHO WERE SUCH AN INTEGRAL PART OF THIS CHURCH FAMILY.

THERE WERE THOSE BEFORE THEM – AND THOSE AFTER AS WELL.

THEY PROVIDED US THE ROOTS OF FAITH & THEY CALL TO US TO REMAIN FAITHFUL AS THEY WERE.

THEY SERVE AS OUR ROLE MODELS OF WHAT IT MEANS TO TRUST THAT GOD WILL WALK WITH THIS CONGREGATION THROUGH EVERY TRIAL WE FACE. THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL LOOKED TO *THEIR* ANCESTORS AS WE LOOK TO *OURS*.

THEY KNEW THEY HAD TO DEPEND UPON ONE ANOTHER – AS DO WE. THEY KNEW THAT IT WAS ONLY AS THEY COLLECTIVELY COMMITTED THEMSELVES TO GOD’S CARE THAT THEY WOULD BE ABLE TO EXPERIENCE A FUTURE THAT WAS EVEN BRIGHTER THAN THEIR PAST.

SO, TOO, FOR US.

GOING BACK TO OUR STEWARDSHIP THEME – EVERY “DOT” IS IMPORTANT IN THE PICTURE OF THE BRIGHT FUTURE GOD HAS PREPARED FOR US – THE “DOTS” REPRESENTED BY THOSE OF THE PAST AS WELL AS THE “DOTS” REPRESENTED BY EVERY ONE OF US TODAY WHO IS A PART OF THIS CHURCH FAMILY.

WHEN THOSE “DOTS” ARE CONNECTED, WE SEE THE “ONCE UPON A TIME” STORY OF GOD’S LOVE & CARE COME TO LIFE.

INDIVIDUALLY, YOU KNOW – AS DID THOSE WHO GATHERED WITH JOHSUA AT SHECHEM THAT DAY – OF THE COUNTLESS WAYS IN WHICH GOD HAS BEEN WITH YOU PERSONALLY THROUGHOUT YOUR LIFE.

YOU KNOW THE GODS OF THIS WORLD AREN’T TO BE TRUSTED.

THEY’RE NOT GOING TO BRING YOU THROUGH THE OVERWHELMING TRIALS OF THE FUTURE ANY MORE THAN THEY WOULD HAVE BEEN WITH YOU THROUGH ALL THAT YOU’VE ALREADY ENDURED IN LIFE.

THIS OLD TESTAMENT STORY IS VITALLY IMPORTANT BECAUSE IT REALLY REPRESENTS SOMETHING WE DO EACH & EVERY SUNDAY IN WORSHIP.

EVERY SUNDAY IS, IN A SENSE, A COVENANT RENEWAL CEREMONY SIMILAR TO THAT WHICH TOOK PLACE AT SHECHEM.

WE'RE GIVEN THE OPPORTUNITY TO LIVE OUT A "ONCE UPON A TIME" STORY OF GOD'S GREAT LOVE & COMPASSIONATE MERCY.

WE REMEMBER *WHOSE* WE ARE, *WHERE* WE ARE & WHERE WE'VE *BEEN*.

**JOSHUA'S CONFESSION IS REALLY ONE THAT WE CAN ALL JOIN IN TOGETHER – "AS FOR ME & MY HOUSEHOLD, WE WILL SERVE THE LORD."
AMEN.**

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