

The Worst Day Ever: Joshua.
When you have to give up what you've clung to
11th Sunday after Pentecost
August 16, 2009

We're continuing in our series today, "The Worst Day Ever" with a look at the last public appearance of a man named Joshua. We'll be looking at our Old Testament reading from the book of Joshua today, chapter 24 verses 1-2, and 14-18, so I invite you to open your Bibles there with me.

Joshua is the 6th book in the Old Testament, so the order goes Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy – the Torah or Pentateuch, that covers everything from Day One of creation to the Israelites being released from slavery in Egypt, the 40 years of desert wandering for them under the leadership of Moses, right up until the month before they entered into the Promised Land. The book of Joshua comes next that details the events after Moses died and the Israelites entered into the Promised Land led by Joshua.

Our reading today occurs at the end of Joshua's life as Israel's leader and judge. So, as we always do, let's set the context.

After Moses died, Joshua was handed the mantle of leadership and under him, the Israelites entered the land promised to them by God. It was not an easy time, however, since the land was being occupied by a number of pagan peoples. The people of Israel literally had to fight and scrape for every inch of ground as they took what God had promised them. Along the way they made some mistakes, made treaties with people they should not have and God Himself even told them not to, and at a few points simply got tired of the fighting and wanted to quit and just claim what they had, without going forward to take all they had been promised.

Joshua, as Israel's Judge, was responsible for rallying the people, keeping them focused on the task at hand, and most importantly, keeping the people focused on God and His Words of instruction, promise and purpose for the people.

Today's reading takes place after the Promised Land had been, for the most part, settled, and Joshua had been leading the people for about 30 years. He's seen them through battle after battle; he's worked with them to judge between disputes and settle problems; he's reminded them of their relationship to YHWH, and in our reading today, it all ends. Today Joshua "retires" and spends the rest of his life off the radar until he dies. For Joshua this was the worst day ever – the day he had to give up what he had devoted his whole life to: his job, his relationships, and his ministry. What's worse is that he knew once he left, the Israelites would not continue with YHWH. But we'll get to that in a minute.

Have you ever had to give anything up you really, REALLY didn't want to? Maybe it was an addiction to something like cigarettes, or some other bad habit. Maybe it was a position or

ideology that you had staked yourself on. Maybe it was a job you had to walk away from for whatever reason. Maybe it was even a person that though you liked, maybe even loved, you knew that person was not the best person for you, and you have to ‘give them up’ even though it was hard.

It’s not easy giving up something is it?

But what if what you were getting was worth giving everything up for?

Take a look at Romans 8:32: *“He who did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all...”*

God gave up His own Son for you! Think about that for a moment. The creator of all there is, the all powerful, Almighty God who has no needs, gave up His own Son, His own self, for the person you see in the mirror every day.

How about Hebrews 12:2? *“Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.”*

Do you know what the joy was that was set before Jesus that led Him to give up Heaven? Do you know what the joy was that was set before Jesus that led Him to give up His own life in a painful, violent, *grace*? Do you know what the joy-filled hope He had was when He did that? The joy was you! You in heaven with Him!

Isaiah 49:16 reminds us how much He loves us, will not forget us, and gave up everything for us: *“See!”* Behold! Pay attention! Listen up! Looky-here! *“I have carved your names into the palms of my hands!”*

God knows what it is to give up something that He loves dearly. God knows the pain of losing one you cherish and love. Never forget that in that moment when Jesus called out, “My God, My God! Why have you forsaken me?”, the unspoken answer that thundered through the universe was “I’ve forsaken You for *them*.”

And don’t for a moment think that didn’t break the heart of God. Don’t think for a moment that’s the end of the story either. Easter Sunday proved God’s acceptance of Jesus’ sacrifice for you and me. The ascension into Heaven 40 days later proved Jesus was not cast off and forgotten, but was going Home – Home to prepare a place for you and me, His joy.

God knows what it is to give something up that means everything to you. He did it for you and me.

Luckily we aren’t faced with literal heaven or hell kinds of concerns when we have to give something up, but that doesn’t necessarily make it easy, does it? So what can we learn from Joshua?

I think the first thing we can take from this is something we might miss if we go too fast. Right off the bat, verse 1 gives us a glimpse into the life and heart of Joshua on the worst day of his life: “Joshua assembled all the tribes of Israel at Shechem.”

Shechem. What’s the big deal about Shechem? In your Bibles next to verse 1, you can write the scripture reference, Genesis 12:1-7: *The LORD had said to Abram, “Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.” So Abram left, as The LORD had told him... Abram traveled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem. The LORD appeared to Abram and said, “To your offspring I will give this land.” So he built an altar there to The LORD, who had appeared to him.*

Joshua took the people to the place where it all started for them. The place where, a thousand years before, a promise had been spoken by God Himself regarding them; a prophesy from the mouth of YHWH about those who gathered that day: the land would be theirs, and they would be a people of God. Joshua took them back to Shechem.

Here’s the first point: on Joshua’s worst day ever when he had to give up something he cherished, He went back to God’s promises. We can do the same when we find ourselves having to give something up we know we have to but don’t want to, or when we find we were not given a choice and the thing we’ve clung to has been taken away from us. What are some of God’s promises?

Matthew 28:20 – *“I am with you always.”*

Hebrews 13:5 – *“Never will I leave you. Never will I forsake you.”* (Which, incidentally, is the same promise God made to Joshua!)

Secondly, we need to serve God. This does not mean we all have to go into a ministry career. We need to take a closer look at this word, “serve.” You can make a note of this in your Bibles: the word “serve” is from the Hebrew word “evad”, and it means to “expend considerable energy and intensity in a task or function; give energy and devotion to God.”¹ One way we serve God is by worshipping Him. “Worship” literally means “to ascribe worth to something.” The point is, on the worst days ever when we’ve lost something dear to us, we serve God by remembering He is the only thing that matters, and give ourselves wholly over to Him in worship, in acknowledging and giving Him the “worth” He is due.

This can be hard when what we’ve lost or had to give up is something ascribed great worth to. In this case, we’ve been worshipping the other thing or the other person over and above God.

¹ Dictionary of Biblical Languages With Semantic Domains : Hebrew (Old Testament): 6268

We've broken the First Commandment – “You shall have no other God's before Me.” Ideally, we should all be able to say with Job, “The LORD gives and the LORD takes away – blessed be the name of The LORD” (Job 1:21) regardless of the circumstances.

I know it's not always easy. I know the pain of loss can be overwhelming sometimes. Remember, God knows, too. He never told us it would be an easy ride, but He promised to always be with us through the good times and bad.

Third, on the worst day ever, when we lose something we've been clinging to, we need to make a firm stand like Joshua did in verse 15: “...Choose for yourself who you will serve” (who or what you will expend considerable energy and intensity and devotion on, ascribing great worth to that thing), “...but as for me and my house, we will serve (expend considerable energy and intensity and devotion on, and ascribe great worth to) The LORD.”

“As for me and my house, we will serve The LORD.” “As for me and my house we will serve The LORD.” Say it with me, and say it like you mean it! “AS FOR ME AND MY HOUSE, WE WILL SERVE THE LORD!!”

On the worst day ever, we still serve The LORD. Saying it out loud, and putting it into practice sends the devil on the run. Remember what we talked about last week: it's okay and right to express our anger, our grief, our feelings to God, and it's right to rest and take care of ourselves. But our service, our worship of The LORD doesn't end.

The interesting thing is it's all cyclical. Do you know how we serve God? Do you know what the starting point is of the worship of God, of expending considerable energy and intensity and devotion, and ascribing great worth to Him is? It goes right back to what Joshua did in our reading today, and what Elijah did in our reading last week: it all starts with God's Word – His word of promise, His word of Law, of Gospel; His word of hope and assurance of Heaven.

Now for the rest of the story. There's more to this day than what we fully see in our reading. I think what just put the frosting on this cake for Joshua, what really helped to push this day over the edge into the ‘worst day ever’ category, is what we mentioned at the beginning: Joshua knew that even though He'd done everything right, the people weren't going to listen and would turn away from God. He was saying goodbye to the people, letting go of everything he knew, but at the same time he also knew what they would do. He had taken them as far as he could, and now it was up to them, and he knew they weren't going to follow through. In verse 19 of chapter 24, Joshua levels the people with a statement on their promises and a warning: “*You are not able to serve The LORD. He is a holy God; He is a jealous God. He will not forgive your rebellion and your sins.*”

Joshua knew the heart of the people. He knew what path they would go down. He was ‘retiring’ from his ministry to them, but he knew they would not keep their promises once he was gone, and we find out that it was true in Judges 2:6-12: *After Joshua had dismissed the Israelites, they*

went to take possession of the land, each to his own inheritance. The people served the LORD throughout the lifetime of Joshua and of the elders who outlived him and who had seen all the great things the LORD had done for Israel... After that whole generation had been gathered to their fathers, another generation grew up, who knew neither the LORD nor what he had done for Israel. Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD and served the Baals. They forsook the LORD, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of Egypt. They followed and worshiped various gods of the peoples around them. They provoked the LORD to anger...

The people did what Joshua knew they would do – they turned away from God and His true word, and went the way of the world and society and culture around them. And don't you think for a moment this didn't break God's heart, too. The One who would forsake His Son for His children, was Himself forsaken by His children after they promised they wouldn't do it. They chose the things of the world over the things of God.

On the worst day ever for Joshua when he had to “let go” he returned to the Word of God, he continued to serve God, and he made no bones about it. No one walked away from Joshua that day not knowing that he stood firmly on the side of God, and would not go along with the ways of the world and society around him because he knew they were not in line with God's word.

Return, serve and announce. Three things we can do, empowered by the Holy Spirit, on our worst days ever when we lose something we've clung to.

Would you pray with me please?

Lord Jesus, thank You for giving up everything You had to rescue those who will believe in You as their only Savior. Thank You for having us in heaven be the joyful thought, the joyful thing, that caused You to embrace Your cross.

Jesus, with Joshua we want to say with all our hearts and minds, “As for me and my house we will serve The LORD!” Help us to do just that.

Holy Spirit, come to us and help us to expend considerable energy and intensity and devotion, and ascribe great worth to You, the Father and the Son – our One, Triune God.

At the same time, we have to express our feelings, Lord. It hurts to lose something we've held on to. It hurts to have something taken from us, or for us to walk away from something we've clung to. Forgive us for worshiping – for ascribing worth – to anything or anyone more than we've ascribed to You.

Thank You for Your promises to be with us always, on the best days, the worst days ever, and everyday in-between.

Amen