

Onward!

Joshua 23:3-8 May 7, 2025

In Pixar's *Onward*, brothers Ian and Barley go on a great adventure, crossing rivers and mountains, facing obstacles and battles as they follow a treasure map. They finally make it to where X marks the spot, only to discover they're back in their own town, right where the adventure started.

As the first quest ends, a brand new one begins. Home is still home, but the future awaits them. The first journey taught them valuable truths and how to love each other. As the saga turns the page, it's obvious that a sequel is on it's way - coming soon to theaters near you.

Our church family is at a significant point in its history. In conversation we use terms like "transition" or "new chapter," and that's ok - those are helpful descriptors. But what we're experiencing is a *continuation* of God's leading. God leads His people in every generation according to His plan and purposes and it is encouraging to know that He is *still* just as faithful to us as He has been to Abraham and to David and to Nehemiah and to Paul and all those who walk with Him.

If you were here Sunday, you know that the Lord put Joshua 23, verses 1 and 2 on Pastor Gene's heart and has led him to step down as our senior Pastor. Through the Spirit's leading and the oversight of the board, I have been asked to step into that position, which I am honored to accept.

Tonight, I'd like us to look again at Joshua's 23 to see a little of how the Lord is leading us for what's next and how we want to continue in the work that the Lord established here 40 years ago.

Joshua 23:3 - ³...you have seen for yourselves everything the Lord your God did to all these nations on your account, because it was the Lord your God who was fighting for you.

The tribes of Israel were headed into a time when Joshua would no longer be their leader. But that didn't mean *their* mission was going to change. Everything the Lord had laid out for them was going to continue. That's the message Joshua wanted to drive home and that *all* of God's people could be strong and make progress as they *continued* to follow the Lord's guidance.

He reminded them they had seen *for themselves* what God did for them. God is the Accomplisher. He is the Author and Finisher, the Pioneer and Perfecter of our faith.¹ If we keep our eyes on Jesus, He will lead us to where He wants us to go, what He wants us to do, how He wants us to do it.

The Book of Acts is so helpful, not just as an inspiring collection of stories of great Christians or the power of God, but also because it shows us how friendly, neighborhood Christians can be led by God. *And* it proves that it is not our responsibility to scheme up our own designs of what a church should be doing, but that as we worship God and honor God and wait on Him *He* will direct. Often in unusual or surprising ways, but it's *His* design. It's *His* work that we join.

¹ Hebrews 12:2

The tribes of Israel had *seen* what God was capable of, the way He wanted to use them, the broad strokes of His plan. What have we seen as a distinct group called out by God? I think most of all we've seen God's gracious, attentive care for us. He has sustained our church since 1985.

He gave us these buildings when we couldn't afford to build one on our own. He gave us the ability to pay it off early when we didn't even realize it. He sustained us through the Great Recession of 2008. Nobody got fired. We didn't have to shake people down for money. He saw us through COVID - no one got sued or arrested even though we stayed open during the lockdown.

Meanwhile, He has consistently shown that He is looking on us and caring for us in many little ways. Countless times, people have come in with an envelope saying, "The Lord told me to give this money to this person and I don't know why." Then we give it to that person and they say, "This is what I needed to pay a bill or stock my pantry."

So often, someone shares a verse on a Wednesday night and someone else will come up after service and say, "That was for me. God was speaking directly about what's going on in my life through that verse."

Of course, salvations. Someone commented on a picture of church the other day and said, "I got saved at Calvary in the YMCA on January 1, 1987." Fast forward to this past Sunday when Alex shared in a group thread, "I just led a guy to the Lord."

We have seen God's faithfulness for 40 years. And we have seen that it is *Him* doing the work. Joshua said, "It was the *Lord* who was fighting for you."

"Hey, Josh, *I* was the one swinging the sword in the Valley of Aijalon." Christians must remind ourselves it is the *Lord* Who does the work. That way we *won't* start to trust in chariots or horses or bank accounts or particular methods. Have you ever noticed in the Old Testament that God has a different design for almost every battle? It's *His* work. Our part is to discover where and how He is leading us. And so we always want to be developing our corporate relationship with God the Holy Spirit because He is the One Who leads in the truth and equips us and sends us out and fills us up.

Joshua 23:4 - ⁴See, I have allotted these remaining nations to you as an inheritance for your tribes, including all the nations I have destroyed, from the Jordan westward to the Mediterranean Sea.

We're not sent to conquer territory. The tribes of Israel were allotted, we are *called*. Called into a lifestyle of worship and the spreading of the Gospel. We're called to certain people and situations. Philip was called to Samaria then to a desert road near Gaza. Peter was called to Cornelius' house then to Joppa. Paul *wanted* to go to Asia - that was a *great* idea - but he was *called* to Macedonia.

God calls us severally and specifically. Every church shouldn't do the same thing. What has God called Calvary Hanford to? We've been blessed to be a part of a *lot* of different things over the years. But calling is an ongoing part of church life. Stephen didn't stay in food service forever and Paul didn't stay as a teacher in Ephesus forever. The Lord loves to continually work in new ways.

The "nations" are mentioned here. They're mentioned to us, too. Of course, we don't destroy, we disciple. Over the last 40 years, we've had great opportunity to do a lot of international work. Our church family has sent teams to Japan and China and the Philippines and Mexico and Belize and Honduras and Peru and Chile and Colombia. Not to mention or support of missions work in India and Africa and Hungary and Georgia and elsewhere. That's not a boast, it's just a reminder that there is an incredible, unlimited list of things the Lord can send us into if we are ready to be sent.

Joshua 23:5 - ⁵The Lord your God will force them back on your account and drive them out before you so that you can take possession of their land, as the Lord your God promised you.

The Lord Jesus promised us that we have battles ahead - not against flesh and blood, but against the powers and principalities of darkness. We can know that whatever lies ahead, the Lord fights for us and that He strengthens and equips us for them. We can rest in what God has *promised* us.

What *has* God promised our church? He has promised to make us a lampstand in our community if we remain faithful to Him.² He has promised us every spiritual blessing in Christ Jesus.³ He's promised us an eternal inheritance in heaven.⁴ Abundant life.⁵ The power of the Holy Spirit.⁶

Along with these promises are the others that He will give us joy and peace and community and opportunities to glorify Him. We discover His promises as we study His word so we can *understand* Who He is and what He has done and wants to *still* do - how His desire is to make us *strong* in Him.

Joshua 23:6 - ⁶"Be very strong and continue obeying all that is written in the book of the law of Moses, so that you do not turn from it to the right or left

Being strong in the Lord is a significant theme in the book of Joshua. We find this idea in chapter 1 verse 6, 1 verse 9, 1 verse 18, 17 verse 17, also here.

Life is often discouraging and difficult. We can feel beat down and broken hearted. But God's desire is that we be people who are spiritually *strong*. Like trees planted by rivers of water.

There's a great moment in Joshua. The tribes are *supposed* to be conquering and settling in their allotted lands. The tribes of Joseph come and say, "Listen, what God has given us isn't going to work. It's not enough. *And* there are enemies with iron chariots down there...so...give us

² Revelation 1:20

³ Ephesians 1:3

⁴ 1 Peter 1:4

⁵ John 10:10

⁶ Acts 1:8

something else." And Joshua says, "You *have* great strength! So how about you go and receive what the Lord gave you." *That* group was enough because of the strength God gave them.

The Lord has provided all we need to be *very* strong. At times we may find ourselves walking with a limp or shedding tears or facing obstacles, but our God does not want us to live in spiritual weakness or spiritual victimhood. Even in our *human* weakness, His goal is to make us strong. Bold. Fully assured and full of truth - truth in a world that is desperate for answers.

We will be strong if we continue in our knowledge of and obedience to the Scriptures. Joshua here says, "continue obeying all that is written in the Law of Moses." There *weren't* other Bible books yet. Here at Calvary, we will *always* hold fast to the systematic preaching and teaching of God's Word because *that* is the only way we can truly know Who God is and who we are and what life is about. *That* is the only way we can be strong.

And I love that Joshua simply says, "Hey, *continue* in your dedication to God's Word." They didn't need to reinvent the wheel. They just needed to keep walking in the light of revelation. And, it's interesting: All these tribes were all going different directions, but they all could continue the same way. Some were going to the hills, some were going to the coasts, but all could walk the same way, in obedience to the Word, applying the Word of God as they went.

The application is obvious. Some of you are going to head west to LNAS tomorrow, some south to Corcoran, some east to Visalia, others north to Fresno. As God's people we can all walk the same way according to the Word of God, which directs us for every phase of life, every situation in life, all that we need for life and Godliness. One family, walking in unity, *wherever* God sends us.

And notice, Joshua says, "Don't turn from it to the right or the left." I was thinking, "Right and left" have a different connotation to us, don't they? But, listen: God's callings often do not fit into our cultural or political framework. God has His own perspective, His own opinions, His own priorities. Our job is not to bend Him to fit our culture, but for us to conform our minds and lives to *His* way.

The Israelites also needed to understand that being in the promised land wasn't the end. Someone *might* read the first five books of the Bible and conclude, "Ok, we're *in* Canaan now, and that's it. We've made it." But Joshua here says, "No, no - the promises of God and the callings of God and the work of God *continues*. We have to keep searching the Scriptures and seeking His will day by day. We're not done yet. We haven't finished the race yet."

So they were to *continue*. The *Theological Wordbook Of The Old Testament* explains this word is one of those rich, Bible words. "The basic idea of the root is 'to exercise great care over.'" That they must first keep in the heart but then it must be kept *through* the actions of the life. It involves the tending of a garden or a flock or a house.⁷ *That's* the kind of continuing God had in mind.

But what does it mean to *obey* God?

⁷ *Theological Wordbook Of The Old Testament*

Joshua 23:7 - ⁷ and so that you do not associate with these nations remaining among you. Do not call on the names of their gods or make an oath to them; do not serve them or bow in worship to them.

On the one hand, there were things to avoid. Obedience meant staying separate from the polluting influences of the pagan culture. Believers *always* need to watch out for this because we're more prone to idolatry than we like to admit. The original audience listening to Joshua *literally* had idols in their homes. In chapter 24 they tell Joshua, "Oh yeah, we *definitely* plan on serving the Lord," and Joshua has to say, "Ok, how about you get rid of all those foreign gods..."

David - the man after God's own heart - even had a household idol when he was married to Michal. What's up with that? But then you go all the way to the end of the New Testament and John's parting message to Christians is, "Little children, guard yourselves from idols."

We want to be a people who know how to identify the other gods out there and guard ourselves from their influence. But we also understand that we serve what we worship. So, as a church family, we always want to be developing our worship life. Worshipping in spirit and in truth. Not just going through the motions, but allowing our worship to permeate our hearts and minds and behavior.

Joshua 23:8 - ⁸ Instead, be loyal to the Lord your God, as you have been to this day.

Obedience is not only about *not* doing certain things. Obedience is about staying *loyal* to the Lord. This word means to follow closely and *cling* to someone, like how Ruth clung to Naomi, or how a husband and wife are supposed to cleave to each other, becoming one.⁸ One source explains that this word "loyal" refers to the soldering process, where a metal is melted and fused with another.⁹

Our God is a consuming fire, and so our hearts, our lives, our futures should melt into Him. He is not added to us, we are brought to be part of *His* family, *His* Kingdom, *His* will.

How do we practically accomplish this loyalty? We find the answer in verse 11. It's not about achieving certain numbers or accomplishing a list of feats. As always, this is about faithful *love*.

Joshua 23:11 - ¹¹ So diligently watch yourselves! Love the Lord your God!

Staying in love with the Lord. The first love. A loyal, active, growing love. A lifestyle of loving Jesus *and*, as the Lord told us, loving our neighbors as ourselves.

Joshua said, "diligently watch yourselves." We're so good at watching others, aren't we? Deciding if they're doing what we think they should. But our church life should be about us watching ourselves

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ David Howard *The New American Commentary, Volume 5: Joshua*

and being about the business God gives us and doing so with loving hearts toward Him and toward one another.

That's the goal. 1 John 2 says that as we keep God's word, the love of God is made complete in us. And Paul urged the Corinthians to reaffirm their love for the Lord.¹⁰ It always comes back to a faithful love. Loving the Lord. Loving our neighbors. Loving the lost. Loving the Word. Loving the Christian life as it has been delivered to us.

We don't know everything about tomorrow. But we *do* know some things. We know the sun will rise and with it God's mercy will be made new for us. We know His goodness will continue. His will *will* be accomplished. We know the Lord will not have left us or forsaken us. We know He will still be speaking, still be leading, still be calling for those who are ready to join His work.

So let's continue on in the joy of the Lord, in the strength of the Lord, knowing that *He* is still faithful, year after year, generation after generation.

¹⁰ 2 Corinthians 2:8