

# Receiving Your Inheritance

## Messages from the Book of Joshua

Message 12

### *Living by Covenant*

Joshua 24:1-33

(Read 24:1, 14-28)

### ***Introduction***

What was it like when you came to Lehigh as a freshman? Did your parents drive you here, with all your stuff and perhaps your little brother and sister? Many of our parents carried our things into our rooms, and maybe your mom made your bed and your dad moved some furniture. Perhaps you bought your books and went out to dinner. Then it was time for Mom and Dad to go. It's an awkward and emotional time. You are really setting out on your own, and your parents are saying good-bye in a more profound way than ever before. So what did they say? Did your mom tell you to be sure to eat right? Did your dad tell you to study hard? Maybe they told you they loved you. Above all, in this poignant moment, you want this leave-taking to be a pleasant memory.

Major life changes are hard – and they get harder as you get older. A child may be terrified his first night at camp, but he soon gets over it and has a good time. But when you reach 80 or 100 you have seen so much – so much joy and hardship, success and failure, life and death. You know so much better the deep, life-long consequences of decisions. It is a frightening thing to turn over responsibility for your loved ones to someone else. That is part of what makes college and marriage of their children emotional transitions for parents. Fear of this unknown also makes it difficult for pastors, presidents, and businessmen to relinquish control of their responsibilities. They know how easy it is to fail, and how many people can be hurt so much by failed leadership.

I think that is why Joshua's final scene is so sober. It's not like the pleasant memory you may have of your parents' departure when you arrived at Lehigh. It's definitely a serious, somber event. Like Moses, his mentor, Joshua knows the future will be dreadful if God's people fail to follow His law. Joshua is a lot more concerned that they follow God, than that they have pleasant memories of him.

### ***The Exhortation***

The heart of this chapter, and the core of Joshua's final words are right there in verse 14, "Serve the LORD!" Israel was living in a time and place where they were surrounded by people who served other gods. They had their pick from a smorgasbord of deities. They knew the many gods of Egypt from having lived there for 400 years. The Canaanites and surrounding nations worshiped a whole different set of gods. Then there were the gods of Mesopotamia, where their ancestor Abraham had grown up. And of course each of the nations who served these gods had their reasons for doing so. Ra, the sun god, was worshiped in Egypt because the sun was so central to life in that land. Baal was the master of the rain and storms – essential to life in Canaan. Then the Ashtoreth, the goddesses of fertility, seemed indispensable to an agricultural society. Sun, rain, fertility – these are absolute necessities. Who in his right mind would jeopardize his life and prosperity by angering one of these gods? Furthermore, who would want to bring calamity to his town by refusing to join in serving them? The pressure on the Israelites to worship such gods would have been tremendous.

Joshua knew that Israel would face tremendous pressure to worship other gods, so he did everything within his power to persuade Israel to remain faithful to the Lord. He began with a brief recital of Israel's history. Now, Joshua didn't do this for the sake of tradition, or because old men like to reminisce. Joshua's

point in reviewing the history of Israel was to drive home a vital point – that the Lord was their deliverer. Abraham was stuck in idol-infested Mesopotamia, but God delivered him. Israel was enslaved in Egypt, but God delivered them. Israel was attacked by the Egyptian army, by Balak, by the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, etc. – but God delivered them from all these foes. Furthermore, God gave them a wonderful new home, ready-made. In verse 13 God says, “*I have given you a land for which you did not labor, and cities which you did not build, and you dwell in them; you eat of the vineyards and olive groves which you did not plant.*” God took a nobody – Abraham – and for no reason He made a great nation of his descendants, and for no reason gave them a magnificent land.

Why? Why did God bless Israel so much? It wasn’t because they were so good! Over and over Moses commented on how rebellious they were, and he remarked how astonishing it was that God chose Israel and delivered her. Let’s read some of his thoughts from Deuteronomy 4:32-40.

*For ask now concerning the days that are past, which were before you, since the day that God created man on the earth, and ask from one end of heaven to the other, whether any great thing like this has happened, or anything like it has been heard. Did any people ever hear the voice of God speaking out of the midst of the fire, as you have heard, and live? Or did God ever try to go and take for Himself a nation from the midst of another nation, by trials, by signs, by wonders, by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and by great terrors, according to all that the LORD your God did for you in Egypt before your eyes? To you it was shown, that you might know that the LORD Himself is God; there is none other besides Him. Out of heaven He let you hear His voice, that He might instruct you; on earth He showed you His great fire, and you heard His words out of the midst of the fire. And because He loved your fathers, therefore He chose their descendants after them; and He brought you out of Egypt with His Presence, with His mighty power, driving out from before you nations greater and mightier than you, to bring you in, to give you their land as an inheritance, as it is this day. Therefore know this day, and consider it in your heart, that the LORD Himself is God in heaven above and on the earth beneath; there is no other. You shall therefore keep His statutes and His commandments which I command you today, that it may go well with you and with your children after you, and that you may prolong your days in the land which the LORD your God is giving you for all time.*

*Deuteronomy 4:32-40*

Wherever you turn in the history of Israel, you find God present doing some previously unknown act. Moses is saying that no man could ever have dreamed of a god like Israel’s God. He was too good to be true – except that He *is* true! No one ever could have imagined a god with power to destroy the most powerful army on earth by commanding the sea – and with the love to do it for a small, weak, troublesome nation. But the Israelites saw his deliverance with their own eyes. Why? Verse 37 tells us. He loved their fathers! In chapter 7 He brings this love right to the present generation.

*The LORD did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any other people, for you were the least of all peoples; but because the LORD loves you, and because He would keep the oath which He swore to your fathers, the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of bondage, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.*

*Deuteronomy 7:7-8*

God delivered Israel from awesome, indestructible enemies. He gave them a wonderful home. And all because He loved them. And He didn’t love them for any good qualities they had. He loved them just because He wanted to.

Have you been loved like this? Do you long for a husband or wife who will love you forever, just because you are you? Do your parents love you, even though you have been a brat – an expensive brat – at times? Do you have any friends who love you in spite of all your flaws – who stick with you even when you are mean and cantankerous? If you had such a lover, how would you respond to him or her? Would you love him in return? Would you be faithful to him forever? Wouldn't it be a crime against nature to despise such love?

This is the heart of Joshua's exhortation. Look at all God has done for you! It is criminal, it is insane, it is unbearably evil to ignore such love. You *must* serve such a God. Not to serve Him would be so wicked as to deserve the hottest hell. Only a beast would reject Him. No, even animals respond to love! How could you even think of serving another God? All reason and passion propel you to serving the Lord.

This exhortation applies just as easily to you as to Israel. You were a nothing, but God loved you. For no reason, God decided to love you and save you. All that you have – your health, your intelligence, your family and friends, your place at Lehigh – all this is a gift from God. Do you really think you did this on your own? Oh, you say, "I worked hard in school. I scored high on the SAT. I work out in the gym and eat good food. I earned what I have." Well, where did you get the brains to learn? Who fed and clothed you while you were studying in school? Did you make your family, or even choose them? And did you create yourself? Of course not! Ultimately, *everything* you have is a gift. You are here at Lehigh because God loved you and brought you here. And that is more than reason enough to serve and worship Him.

But God went far beyond giving you the earthly blessings you enjoy. These by themselves are sufficient reason to worship him, but they pale beside the eternal life He gives through His Son. God loves you so much, He killed His own Son instead of you for all the sins you have done. I received an email this week from someone who is wondering why there is so much apathy toward God these days, even among believers. Part of the answer is that we forget the magnitude of our salvation. We make peace with sin and diminish the value of God's love. We aren't surrounded by material idols, like the Israelites, but we *are* surrounded by other loves. We are enticed by the love of good grades, and the praise of parents and teachers. We are seduced by entertainment on all sides, and the love of friends who lure us away from God. We are lulled into thinking that life revolves around sex, and love pleasure more than Christ. How can God compete with the pleasure of achievement, or the excitement of the movies, or the rush of sexual release? God gets pushed to the margins of life, to be brought out of the closet when we need Him, like on September 11. We forget that all these pleasures are lecherous parasites, and that only God truly satisfies. We forget that we are born in death and live to die. We forget that Christ died at the hand of one who is willing to forgive all this idiocy, your miserable sinfulness, and calls you today to come to Him.

We are just as selfish and rebellious as the Israelites – our selfishness and rebellion simply takes a different form. But God loves us, just as He loved the Israelites. How can you so coldly ignore Him? Won't you serve Him?

### ***The Covenant***

When the people of Israel heard Joshua's call to serve God, they immediately concurred. Did you notice how strongly they responded? This was no ho-hum reply. They said, "*Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods.*" (v. 16) This statement reveals several things about the Israelites. First, they realize that serving other gods amounts to forsaking the Lord. They are not pretending that they can do both. And it shows that they understand they have been the Lord's until now. They are not choosing in a vacuum. They are not in a position of moral neutrality. There is no such thing. *Now* they are the Lord's. To serve another god means rejecting and leaving the Lord. Furthermore, the strength of their decision is evident in the phrase, "far be it from us". Never, under no conditions, will they even consider

such a thing as serving other gods.

This is a very fine response. You would think that Joshua would have been greatly relieved. These people, finally, have gotten the point. They see how much God has done for them, they are grateful, and they are determined to serve Him. Joshua could relax that a lifetime of struggle for this nation was successful.

But no! Joshua shot back with a rude reply. *“You cannot serve the LORD, for He is a holy God. He is a jealous God; He will not forgive your transgressions nor your sins. If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, then He will turn and do you harm and consume you, after He has done you good.”* (vv. 19-20) Whatever is *wrong* with Joshua?! Here the people declare their commitment to God, and Joshua rejects them! Is this crazy, or what? Senility maybe. Where’s the stage manager. Let’s get this guy off the scene before he ruins a profound religious moment.

But this statement of Joshua’s is the most profound word in the whole book. It’s true. You *cannot* serve God. He is too holy, and you are too sinful. Whatever came over you that you thought you could serve Him? We have shown that the only human response to God’s love is to worship Him, but didn’t we also just finish saying that you keep minimizing sin? You have this silly, sentimental idea of love. You think that you and God like each other, so you can be friends. Everything is going to be all right. Wrong, buster. Everything is *not* going to be all right. God doesn’t play around. You screw up, and He will nail you. Did you forget the desert? Forty years! Remember Dothan? He’s not around anymore. God killed him for rebellion. You know Aaron’s four sons? Yeah, there are only two left. God incinerated the others because they disobeyed. And they only did it once! Joshua is right, folks. You can’t serve God. It’s impossible. If you try, you will fail. You sin, and you’ll be sorry! If you promise to serve God and mess up, you will never escape God’s wrath!

Is this enough to scare you away from God? If you had been there would you have said, “Right, Joshua. I’m just not cut out for serving the Lord. I’ll find an easier God.” But how did Israel respond? They were undeterred! They were determined to serve the Lord. Why? Why would you intentionally serve such a terrifying, dangerous God?

Jesus posed a similar question to the disciples. He had been teaching all day, and no one understood what He said. Most left in boredom and frustration. Finally He turned to the twelve disciples and said, *“Do you also want to go away?”* Peter spoke for them all and said, *“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. Also we have come to believe and know that You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”* (John 5:67-69)

Friends, let me honestly tell you, you can find easier gods than the Lord. These days most people make their own. Most Americans start with the God of the Bible, and they shape Him to suit their whims. They design gods who are nice, sensitive, fun, lovable – and above all, safe. These gods are a pleasure to have around. But while these gods may be appealing, they can never deliver you from harm, they do not truly love, and – most important of all, they cannot give life. Those who serve gods of their own design get nothing more than they put into them, and mortal man can only design mortal gods. We are born to die, and die we all shall – unless we get life from some true God, some God far different from us, one who created life and possesses life in his own being. As Peter said, only Jesus gives eternal life, and everything else is meaningless in comparison.

You can find easier, safer gods than the Lord, but they cannot love or save you. The Lord can save you and will love you, but you cannot serve Him. What a cruel position! How can we find life and love if

the only source is impossible to attain? Surely all is hopeless and mankind is doomed! And surely this would be the case if Christ had not come. God demands obedience, but we are unable to obey. If we try to save ourselves we will die trying – at the hand of the God in whom we sought salvation. But here is where the mystery and the glory of the gospel are revealed. For Jesus not only came and taught us how to live, He not only died for our sins – He also lived a perfect life. The obedience to the covenant that Israel could never do, that we cannot do – Jesus did it! Jesus *did* serve the Lord. And when you believe in Him, you get the credit for His obedience. Christ frees us from punishment from sin, and gives us a positive record of holy living. You cannot serve the Lord, but Christ served Him for you, and this makes it safe for you to come to God.

You cannot serve the Lord. You are more wicked than you can grasp. But Christ served the Lord for you. His salvation is more amazing than you can understand. Christ is the key. The faithful Israelites, in their imperfect obedience, looked for a Messiah to save them. We look at Christ who saved us. In Christ we can do the impossible. Through Him we can serve the Lord. And all those who believe in Christ will be delivered from all their sins, will be ravished by the love of God, and will live forever. Don't throw this away by pursuing safe, fun, impotent gods. Come to Jesus. Be loved by Him – and live forever.

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