

In the name of Jesus our Savior, dear friends,

The old military commander knew the the end of his life was near. But it was not that he was in a dangerous battle situation. In fact, it was a very peaceful time for him and his country. He had gathered the people around him. They listened as he told them he would soon die. They listened as he recounted trying times, times of war, times of victory. But as he brought up the events of the past, it was not about *him* gaining victories; it was about victories the LORD had won for his people. Before Joshua left this world for the great victory of eternal life in heaven, he gave a speech—it might even be better to call it a sermon.

Joshua wanted to encourage God's people in their faith and as he did so, he made something clear that is really lost on many people. That is this:

FAITH CALLS FOR ACTION!

Joshua had a goal with this sermon of his. He was looking for personal renewal and commitment from God's people. And how would it happen? What was the only way something like that *could* happen? By reflecting on the goodness of God and the faithfulness he had always shown to them. And so he reviews the victories God had won for them as he brought them across the Jordan River and into the Promised Land, a land of their own after so many years of captivity and wandering.

If Joshua would have had a picture album of Israel's history, he would have opened it up and shown them photos of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob. He would have pointed to shots of an 80-year old Moses meeting with Pharaoh, 10 pictures of 10 different plagues sent upon the Egyptians, and others from their 40 years of wandering in the wilderness after the Exodus. Snapshots of victories over the Amorites, Perizzites, Canaanites, Hittites and others—victories given by the Lord would have followed. Joshua spoke of all these blessings and miracles and more—all of which came from the hands of the God who had always been faithful to them. God had shown his love to his children in so many ways and for so long.

How could an Israelite not feel a sense of gratitude and love and loyalty to their God after being reminded of the LORD's faithful love?

Just as it was good for the Israelites, it is good for you and me to review the love of our God to us. And you probably even DO have pictures of some of the evidences of God's gracious love! Remember how God was with you through the trouble that went on in your house when you were growing up? How he sent angels to protect you even when you were doing stupid things and you didn't deserve it? Think of the rough times—when death came to your family, when there were serious illnesses. Did God not help

you persevere? Think back to your wedding day as you married the one you loved. And remember how he safely brought your child into the world...or children? Didn't he provide for you when you lost your job and you weren't sure what you were going to do? Haven't there been times when money came just when you needed it? Remember when God sent friends to comfort you, family to support you, a caring pastor to serve you? Think about the blessings of your business, the pleasure received from your talents, the comfort of a stable church and Christian friends, the gifts of a faithful spouse and God-fearing children.

Everyone's life is different, but every child of God can look back on their life and see the hand of the loving God and the gifts of his grace just like the Israelites were led to do that day by Joshua. Just review the goodness of your God to you—you who, truth be told, didn't deserve the Almighty's favor or even one of those blessings. Our sins make us totally unworthy to receive God's attention and care, but he has given his love in abundance and even when we were not faithful to him, he was faithful to us.

How do you feel about your God right now? Oh wait—we forgot to mention Jesus Christ our Savior! As you were—as you are—a sinful person with glaring weaknesses and disappointing sins against the God who loves you, you did not deserve to have the Son of God enter this world to save you from reaping the curse of those sins. That he should live perfectly because you can't was so totally undeserved. That he should willingly suffer at the hands of people so that you will not suffer in hell was so totally undeserved.

Okay, now what are your feelings about your Savior God?

If you are grateful, if you had maybe not thought about all his blessings in a while, if you feel a strong love toward God for his grace and faithfulness to you, then maybe you and I are in a similar position as those Israelites when Joshua spoke these words (Joshua 24:14-24):

¹⁴ “Now fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your forefathers worshiped beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. ¹⁵ But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served 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.”

¹⁶ Then the people answered, “Far be it from us to forsake the LORD to serve other gods! ¹⁷ It was the LORD our God himself who brought us and our fathers up out of Egypt, from that land of slavery, and performed those great signs before our eyes. He protected us on our entire journey and among all the nations through which we traveled. ¹⁸ And the LORD drove out before us all the nations, including the Amorites, who lived in the land. We too will serve the LORD, because he is our God.”

¹⁹ Joshua said to the people, “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. ²⁰ If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, he will turn and bring disaster on you and make an end of you, after he has been good to you.”

²¹ But the people said to Joshua, “No! We will serve the LORD.”

²² Then Joshua said, “You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen to serve the LORD.”

“Yes, we are witnesses,” they replied.

²³ “Now then,” said Joshua, “throw away the foreign gods that are among you and yield your hearts to the LORD, the God of Israel.”

²⁴ And the people said to Joshua, “We will serve the LORD our God and obey him.”

Joshua asks you what your choice is: trust in yourself or serve false gods—which today are more like the pursuit of money, sex, recreation and good times, your toys—serve them or serve God.

It’s a no-brainer! Have the things you’ve been sinfully running after done more for you than the LORD has? That’s not even possible! They can’t do what the God of all grace has done for you!

Joshua says “*Stop living for them!*” What Joshua really says is “*Make your choice—carry on like you are or serve God.*” There really is no middle ground. And as for Joshua, the choice was obvious. He stands as a shining example of faith and commitment to God as he stands before the people and declares “**As for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.**”

I hope that as God’s people, who have admittedly put other things as priorities before God and his will, you too find an obvious choice here. If the choice of faith is as obvious to you as it was to the Israelites, then your FAITH IS CALLED TO ACTION! Repent of your sin, stop living like money is more important than God, that doing whatever you want to do with your life and your time is more important than setting priorities by the Word of God. Stop living like you and what you want are more important than your Savior Jesus and his will for your life!

Your choice is to do what you’ve been doing OR do as Joshua encourages you: **Fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness.** Fearing the Lord means respecting him, standing in awe of him. And that respect and awe are what leads to serving him.

We should make one thing clear: this is not a choice laid before a person who does not know the LORD and who is expected to make a decision to follow God. Remember that Joshua is speaking to believers—children of God—and telling them to clean up their act and show God the proper respect of faith in their life.

You and I need to listen to Joshua's commands and follow his example if we are heads of our households and leaders of God's people (pastors, church councilmen, and husbands take special note!). But this also applies to every single Christian because it is a matter of faith.

You heard the people's reaction to Joshua: **Then the people answered, "Far be it from us to forsake the LORD to serve other gods! It was the LORD our God himself who brought us and our fathers up out of Egypt, from that land of slavery, and performed those great signs before our eyes. He protected us on our entire journey and among all the nations through which we traveled. And the LORD drove out before us all the nations, including the Amorites, who lived in the land. We too will serve the LORD, because he is our God."** Considering God's faithfulness and love, how could they do anything but recommit themselves to God?! But you also noticed that Joshua didn't react as you might expect to this entirely appropriate response of God's people! He said *"You won't be able to do it. God won't forgive you. Even though he's been good to you, he will destroy you."*

How would you like it if I told you that from this pulpit?! Why did he say it? Was it a test of their commitment? Was he questioning whether they really meant it? Did he think they were merely caught up in the moment? Did he want to be sure it was not simply SELF-confidence on their part? Was he stressing the grace of God in the face of their unworthiness? It's hard to say, but what's important is the reaction of the people. They jump up and repeat their devotion to God—they are sincere! They truly want to get rid of the things that prevented them from living their love for the LORD! But just in case, Joshua says, *"You really mean it?"* And the people say, *"Yes, we really do. We will serve the Lord!"* And Joshua says again, *"Then I mean it—get rid of the false gods!"* And the people respond again, **"We will serve the LORD our God and obey him."**

Many people would simply tell you that faith is just what you believe. But throughout the Bible, God says that faith is what you believe AND it is shown by the way you live. If you have faith, it shows in your life. Many people say *"Yeah, I'm gonna clean up my life, get rid of the sinful things that are keeping me from living my love for God."* But they don't really mean it. It sounds like a great idea in church, but once back in the routine, nothing changes.

Maybe there's a lesson for us in Joshua's approach. Joshua points to our sin and the need to put sin aside and then he checks to see what the response is. Maybe he makes his point that FAITH CALLS FOR ACTION by asking a couple times if we mean it when we say we'll change the things that are wrong and serve our Savior in all that we do. Joshua checks and double-checks our response. What will yours be? The only acceptable choice to God is that of faith...and FAITH CALLS FOR ACTION! God grant us forgiveness in Christ for our failures to live for him, and by his Holy Spirit—through Word and Sacrament—strengthen us to say with Joshua and the rest of God's people, **"We will serve the Lord!."** Amen.

Epiphany 5—February 6, 2011

WELCOME

Good morning! Welcome to worship in God's house on this 5th Sunday after Epiphany. Today God tells us through his Word how precious we are to him—that we are called to be his people and live for him. He especially emphasizes today that Christian faith leads to expressions of that faith in our daily lives. Faith in Jesus Christ our Savior leads to actions which show that faith.

We'll worship today using Divine Service I. Please join to sing hymn 232 "Lord of My Life, Whose Tender Care."

READINGS

Joshua 24:14-24

These inspiring words of Joshua will serve as the sermon text today.

1 Peter 2:9-12

Peter tells us to live lives that are worthy of our calling as God's people so that we stand out and others might come to know their God.

Matthew 5:13-20

Christians who are blessed by God are to be a blessing to others. We are Salt—a preservative to keep this world from rotting, and we are Light that must shine, giving evidence of the faith in our hearts. Jesus wants us to be Salt and Light so that others may see God through us.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

1. Good Morning again and welcome to guests...
2. Every announcement in your worship folder today is important and timely!
 - Information about the upcoming Voters' Meeting is out for you at the exits—make sure you pick one up and read through it all. This is one of the most important pieces of communication we have to share the blessings and challenges of our ministry together and to receive feedback from you.
 - Women of Grace check out the information about the event this Saturday. You have the opportunity for great Christian fellowship and to hear a wonderful guest speaker. Remember this is for women of all ages—we hope you'll make it.
 - Mission Festival is next Sunday here at Grace. We're very pleased to have with us Pastor Joshua Stahmann, former missionary to Japan. Don't miss his presentation between the services next Sunday or the Potluck after 10 AM!
 - Some of you have been here each week but haven't picked up your year-end contribution statements yet. If you used offering envelopes or the automatic giving, you'll find an envelope with your name on it out in the courtyard. PLEASE pick yours up today.

3.

10 AM—Please stick around for a bit this morning for fellowship in the courtyard.

We'll conclude our worship by singing hymn 325 and we wish you God's blessings on your week!