

The Rest of the Story

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Joshua 2:14-21, 25-27

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Years ago there was a well-known radio broadcaster by the name of Paul Harvey. During the Second World War and continuing thereafter, his broadcasts would feature little known stories about incidents and individuals that would otherwise have been forgotten. His program would always end with these famous words, "Now you know the rest of the story." After the two spies reported back to Joshua, a series of events took place which might also be described as "The Rest of the Story." In fact, the remaining chapters in the Old Testament book of Joshua tell the remarkable story of how, with God's help, they took the land which the Lord had promised to them. Here is a brief summary of what took place.

- **The Miraculous Crossing of the Jordan River.** As the Ark of the Covenant entered the river, it stopped flowing so that the people of Israel could cross over on dry land (Joshua 3:1-17).
- **The Destruction of the City of Jericho.** The Israelites marched around the city but God knocked down the walls (Joshua 5:13-6:27).
- **The Consequences of Sin in the Camp.** Achan and his family disobeyed the Lord and brought great harm upon their fellow countrymen (Joshua 7:1-26).
- **The Deception of the Gibeonites.** Because the Israelites didn't check with the Lord, they made a bad agreement with a delegation of citizens from a nearby city (Joshua 9:1-27).
- **The Nighttime Daylight Battle.** Joshua had to ask for a little help from the Lord for some extra daylight to defeat the enemies of the Gibeonites (Joshua 10:1-15).
- **The Gradual Conquest of Canaan.** Over a period of time the Israelites gradually conquered most but not all of the Promised Land (Joshua 10:29-13:5).
- **The Division of the Land.** Each of the twelve tribes of Israel received a portion of the land which had been promised to them (Joshua 13:6-19:51).
- **The Covenantal Ceremony at Shechem.** Near the end of Joshua's life the people of Israel gathered together to renew their covenantal relationship with the Lord (Joshua 24:1-27).

What if anything does these events in the book of Joshua have to do with our church, or for that matter, with the upcoming celebration of our nation's birthday? First of all, even with God's help it took a great deal of time and effort for Israel to secure their

inheritance. It was a campaign that lasted about 6 to 7 years before the land was divided up among the various Israeli tribes. In fact, after describing all of the places that the Israelites conquered, this Old Testament book declares, "Joshua waged war against these kings for a long time" (Joshua 11:18). So they didn't take the Promised Land overnight. It took a while to secure what God had promised.

Likewise, don't be surprised if it takes us a while to find the individual who will be our next pastor. Downstairs in the hallway beside the fellowship hall, there are pictures of most if not all of the pastors who have served this church from its beginning. One thing you might not have noticed, however, is that some of them served for only a short period of time. These were the interim ministers who took over the leadership of the church until a new pastor could be found. They usually served for one to two years, sometimes a little longer. Then, as now, it took a while to find the right person. So don't become exasperated if the Pastor Nominating Committee seems to be taking a long, long time to find someone. Selecting a candidate for our church family, or for that matter any church family, is a serious responsibility. Just like Joshua's campaign in the Promised Land, it cannot be rushed.

Second, during the covenantal ceremony at Shechem, Joshua boldly declared that the time had come to make a decision. Whom were they going to serve, the false gods of the past or the Lord God who brought them out of Egypt and who had given them the land in which they now dwelled? They had a choice to make. The same is true for us as we look to the future of our church and beyond that to the future of our nation. So just as Joshua reminded the people of what had transpired in the past, let me do that for you today.

Like Israel, America was founded upon a belief in God, the God of the Bible. In many instances, especially among those who arrived during its earliest days, it also included a desire and in many instances, a determination to live by His statutes and commandments.

God's laws and mandates would become the basis for forming a new society in a New World. Beginning with the Pilgrims who arrived on the Mayflower and continuing all the way through the formative years of our country, this was a guiding principle for those who birthed our nation. For example, when George Washington was elected as our first president in 1789, what did he and the members of Congress do immediately following his inauguration in New York City. They adjourned to the nearby Saint Paul's Chapel in Lower Manhattan for prayer and worship. And just in case you're wondering, it's one of the few nearby buildings that were spared during the 9/11 cataclysm. Today it is often referred to as the "Ground Zero Chapel." And what was the first textbook that found its way into America's schoolrooms? It's called the *McGuffey Reader*. First published in 1836, it was a basic grammar book, teaching children how to read phonically. Its subject matter was religious in nature, based upon the Bible and a Presbyterian understanding of the moral values and beliefs contained in the Scriptures. Finally, when we sing our great patriotic hymns and songs at this time of year in celebration of our nation's birthday, whose name and presence is invoked over and over again? The last verse of this beloved hymn immediately comes to mind, "Our fathers' God, to Thee,

Author of liberty, to Thee we sing: Long may our land be bright with freedom's holy light; Protect us by Thy might, Great God, our King!"

Unfortunately, this kind of religious devotion no longer resonates as clearly and strongly as it once did. Increasingly we have become a nation that values not freedom **of** religion, but freedom **from** religion. There is, in fact, a political organization in America by that very name. Their stated goal is to remove every vestige of religious practice and belief, especially Christianity, from our culture. Consequently, praying and even possessing a Bible can now get you into trouble in numerous public venues throughout our nation, something which would have been unthinkable just a few years ago. Furthermore, America's values, what we consider to be of greatest importance, have changed over the years. This is what the *Wall Street Journal* recently reported. In the past 25 years, 1998 to 2023, the paper stated that a tectonic shift had taken place in what used to be considered of great value to the average American. **Patriotism** had dropped from 70% to 38%. **Religion** had dropped by 62% to 39%. **Having children** had dropped by 59% to 30%. **Community involvement** had dropped from 47% to 27%. The only value of significant importance that had increased was **money**, up from 31% to 43%. One has only to look at what is happening all across our nation to comprehend that we have turned away from the Lord and adopted a way of life that is bringing untold misery, despair and violence upon us.

So what does all of this mean? For us as a church and for us as a nation, there is a decision confronting us. Are we going to serve the Lord and live by His standards, or are we going to choose some other source of authority and choose to live under its dictates?

Even now that decision is before us and the consequences are more clearly evident with each passing day. Both the future of our congregation and, most assuredly, the future of our nation depend on how we answer this question and not just what we say, but what we do, how we live out our lives in relationship to the Lord and to one another. Nearly three thousand years ago, Joshua summoned the people of Israel and said to them, "Who are you going to serve? You have a choice to make. But as for me and my family, we will serve the Lord." May we, both as a church family and hopefully as an entire nation respond by boldly declaring, "We too will serve the LORD, because He is our God" (Joshua 24:18).