

This morning I am in the final week of the sermon series I have been doing on the Old Testament book of Joshua, the sixth book of the Bible. If you're unfamiliar with this book of the Bible, the historical context is that the Israelites, who were enslaved in Egypt, have been set free by God, using a man named Moses, with the plan of bringing them to the land of Canaan, a land which God had promised to their ancestor Abraham 600 years earlier. After the Israelites wander in the wilderness for 40 years as a result of their disobedience, Joshua leads the Israelites across the Jordan River and into the Promised Land, where they fight many battles and drive out the wicked inhabitants of the land. This morning we are in chapter 24, the final message that Joshua gives to the people of Israel.

Joshua 24:1-33 - *Then Joshua assembled all the tribes of Israel at Shechem. He summoned the elders, leaders, judges and officials of Israel, and they presented themselves before God. ² Joshua said to all the people, "This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: 'Long ago your forefathers, including Terah the father of Abraham and Nahor, lived beyond the River and worshiped other gods. ³ But I took your father Abraham from the land beyond the River and led him throughout Canaan and gave him many descendants. I gave him Isaac, ⁴ and to Isaac I gave Jacob and Esau. I assigned the hill country of Seir to Esau, but Jacob and his sons went down to Egypt. ⁵ "'Then I sent Moses and Aaron, and I afflicted the Egyptians by what I did there, and I brought you out. ⁶ When I brought your fathers out of Egypt, you came to the sea, and the Egyptians pursued them with chariots and horsemen as far as the Red Sea. ⁷ But they cried to the LORD for help, and he put darkness between you and the Egyptians; he brought the sea over them and covered them. You saw with your own eyes what I did to the Egyptians. Then you lived in the desert for a long time. ⁸ "'I brought you to the land of the Amorites who lived east of the Jordan. They fought against you, but I gave them into your hands. I destroyed them from before you, and you took possession of their land. ⁹ When Balak son of Zippor, the king of Moab, prepared to fight against Israel, he sent for Balaam son of Beor to put a curse on you. ¹⁰ But I would not listen to Balaam, so he blessed you again and again, and I delivered you out of his hand. ¹¹ "'Then you crossed the Jordan and came to Jericho. The citizens of Jericho fought against you, as did also the Amorites, Perizzites, Canaanites, Hittites, Girgashites, Hivites and Jebusites, but I gave them into your hands. ¹² I sent the hornet ahead of you, which drove them out before you-- also the two Amorite kings. You did not do it with your own sword and bow. ¹³ So I gave you a land on which you did not toil and cities you did not build; and you live in them and eat from vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant.' 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." ²⁵ On that day Joshua made a covenant for the people, and there at Shechem he drew up for them decrees and laws. ²⁶ And Joshua recorded these things in the Book of the Law of God. Then he took a large stone and set it up there under the oak near the holy place of the LORD. ²⁷ "See!" he said to all the people. "This stone will be a witness against us. It has heard all the words the LORD has said to us. It will be a witness against you if you are untrue to your God." ²⁸ Then Joshua sent the people away, each to his own inheritance. ²⁹ After these things, Joshua son of Nun, the servant of the LORD, died at the age of a hundred and ten. ³⁰ And they buried him in the land of his inheritance, at Timnath Serah in the hill country of Ephraim, north of Mount Gaash. ³¹ Israel served the LORD throughout the lifetime of Joshua and of the elders who outlived him and who had experienced everything the LORD had done for Israel. ³² And Joseph's bones, which the Israelites had brought up from Egypt, were buried at Shechem in the tract of land that Jacob bought for a hundred pieces of silver from the sons of Hamor, the father of Shechem. This became the inheritance of Joseph's descendants. ³³ And Eleazar son of Aaron died and was buried at Gibeah, which had been allotted to his son Phinehas in the hill country of Ephraim.

There are three main messages in Joshua's final speech to the Israelites:

1) He locates their personal story in God's grand story

From verses 2-13, Joshua gives them a message from God, recounting how their ancestors were idolators, serving false gods, but that God chose Abraham and brought him out of that situation and into a relationship with Him. He reminds them He also brought them out of slavery in Egypt, and then led them across the Red Sea, destroying the Egyptian armies that were pursuing them when the Red Sea swept over them and drowned them. He reminds them that it was He who brought them into the land of Canaan, who drove out the wicked people who were living there, and it was He who gave them the land in which they now rest. He reminds them that every victory, every blessing, is because of His grace – an undeserved gift of God.

Why is this history lesson so important? By telling them where they have come from God, through Joshua, shows them how their personal story is part of a larger story. Their experience of fighting battles and setting down in the land of Canaan, is not random, but finds itself in God's grand story of salvation. And by doing this, he gives their life meaning, purpose, and significance.

The meaning question is so central to our lives. I have heard Tim Keller define meaning as the overlap of purpose and significance. He gives an example of finding a pile of rocks in the woods, which may cause you to ask, "what do these rocks mean?" If they were put there by someone, maybe as a memorial or to mark a trail, then the pile of rocks has purpose. They are there for a reason, and they have significance – they make a difference, in that they remind people of something, or point the way to the trail. The pile of rocks has meaning. But if they are just there randomly, then they have no meaning, because they are not there on purpose, nor do they serve any significant function.

I think this is incredibly important to reflect upon today, because I think a lot of people in our world, and perhaps some of you, have a meaning problem, a purpose problem, a significance problem. There are plenty of people who aren't sure their lives mean anything. They may wonder why they are here, or what this is all for. They do not feel like their lives are a part of something larger, something important.

Certainly, if you are not sure there is a God, this makes sense. After all, if we are just the product of evolution, of natural selection and random mutation, then in the end we are like the pile of rocks. Nobody put us here for a purpose, and in the end, our lives will not have any lasting significance. We are here by accident, and one

day we will die, anyone who remembers us will also die, and eventually the world will cease to exist and all of this will be forever forgotten and meaningless.

As the evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould, who died in 2002, put it: *“We are here because one odd group of fishes had a peculiar fin anatomy that could transform into legs for terrestrial creatures; because the earth never froze entirely during an ice age; because a small and tenuous species, arising in Africa a quarter of a million years ago, has managed, so far, to survive by hook and by crook. We may yearn for a ‘higher answer’ – but none exists”*

Is that truly the larger story in which we find ourselves, one of cold, meaningless, naturalistic processes? Or is there a better story? A truer story?

Joshua begins his speech by locating the personal story of the Israelites in the grand story of God. They are not just there randomly, but have been brought there by a loving God who created them and has a purpose for their lives. Their lives will be meaningful as they fulfill the purpose for which they were created.

So what about you? Do you know what your life means? Do you know the purpose for which you were created? Do you know whether your life has lasting significance?

I believe that when your personal story becomes a part of God’s grand story, that is when your life begins to have meaning. That is when you begin to fulfill your purpose, and when your life begins to take on lasting, eternal significance. When “God created the world” becomes “God created me, and I am here to know Him and to reflect Him to this world,” you begin to live with purpose. When “all have sinned against a holy God” becomes “I am a sinner who has rebelled against a holy God, and I am deserving of eternal separation from God,” then your life begins to take on greater meaning. When “Jesus died on the cross to save sinners and restore them to God” becomes “Jesus died for me, to take the punishment that I deserved, to bring me back to God,” then your life becomes eternally meaningful. And when “everything we do matters eternally for God” becomes “everything that I do for God matters eternally, and I will live with Him forever,” then your life takes on incredible significance.

When your personal story becomes a part of God’s grand story, everything about your life becomes meaningful. Your life has purpose – you were created by God for a reason.

Psalm 139:13-14 - For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well.

And Ephesians 2:10:

Ephesians 2:10 - For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

As the Westminster Shorter Catechism says, the chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. You were created to know God, to worship Him, and to enjoy Him forever. There is a purpose in your life, and when your personal story becomes a part of God's grand story, your life becomes meaningful.

So how does your personal story become a part of God's grand story?

2) He calls them to repent and to trust in and follow God

Joshua 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.

After Joshua locates their personal story in God's grand story, he calls them to repent and follow God. Throw away your idols, your false gods, and worship and serve God. Live for Him. Trust Him. Follow Him. Stop looking to idols to save you, to fulfill you, to satisfy you, to give your life meaning, and look to the God who has saved you and blessed you, and trust in Him.

How does your story become part of God's grander story? It happens when you repent – turn from your sins, stop looking to the people and things of this world to save and fulfill you, and choose to trust in and follow God. We may not have idols of stone or gold, but we are not very different than the people in Joshua's time. We still look to things other than God to save us, to give our lives meaning, to fulfill us. We look to them to do for us what only God can do. You see, the problem with looking to anything other than God is that it is not meant to carry that burden. Every person you love will eventually leave you or die, or you will leave them or die. Every job will end. The money will go away. The looks will fade, the health will deteriorate. The things you love will not be there forever. Death will make sure of that.

This morning, I believe that God is calling you to not put your trust in idols, not to look for your meaning in things and people that are not meant to carry that burden, that are too fragile to hold what it is you are looking for. Do not put your ultimate trust in relationships, for people can not save you, complete you, or fulfill you. Do not put your ultimate hope in money or a job. That is a shaky foundation that can not sustain your need for meaning and security. Do not put your ultimate hope in your passions and pursuits, for what will happen when they are gone. Do not put your ultimate joy in the pleasures of this world, for they will not fulfill you.

Joshua calls them to throw away their idols and worship and serve God, for that is the purpose for which they were created, and the only thing that in the end will save and satisfy them. And I challenge you this morning to do the same. Some of you have been on the fence for too long, and that is a painful place to be. Choose this day who you will serve. Will you live for the people and things of this world, who can not save or fulfill you? Or will you embrace the purpose for which you were created? Will you allow your personal story to get caught up in God's grand story? Will you begin to truly live into the good plan that God has for your life, a plan that has eternal significance? Will you repent and believe, trust and follow in God today?

The puzzling thing in Joshua's speech to them is that the people respond in the affirmative, declaring that they will serve and follow God. But in response, Joshua says:

Joshua 24:19-20 - 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. 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."

Joshua knows that despite the enthusiasm of the moment, the people are weak, and double-minded, and that they can not measure up to God's requirements. They need more than enthusiasm; they need a Savior who will make up for their inability to follow God's laws. And we are in the same boat today. Enthusiasm is great, and a desire to trust in and follow God is a good thing. But in the end, we are a people who can eagerly declare our commitment to God in one moment, and by the end of the day we have forgotten our commitment and gone back to our idols. We need more than enthusiastic dedication; we need a Savior.

Thank God we have one. God knew that we could not measure up, and this is why He sent Jesus, to live the perfect life that we could not live, and to die a sacrificial

death on the cross in our place, so that all who turn from sin, who stop trusting in their idols, would have eternal life.

Romans 3:19-24 - *Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. ²⁰ Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin. ²¹ But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. ²² This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.*

Ephesians 2:8-9 - *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast.*

This morning, let your personal story become a part of God's grand story of salvation. Stop putting your hope and your trust in the things of this world, that can not save or fulfill you, and put your trust in the Lord, who died in your place and offers you a way to be right with God.

The last message Joshua gives them is this:

3) He is willing to serve God even if He is standing alone

He tells them this:

Joshua 24:14-15 - *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. 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...*

I don't know what you will do, he says. I don't know if you will choose God or go the way of the other nations, serving other gods. But I know what I am going to do. I will serve the Lord, regardless of what anyone else does. I will serve God, even if I go alone.

In the end, everyone else will fade away, and it will only be you and the Lord. You will be accountable for your life, whether you lived your life according to the purpose He had for you, or whether in the end you lived a life of insignificance, a meaningless life, because you rejected the story God had for you.

Let today be the day that you stand with Joshua and say, as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.

If you have never made a decision to follow God, pray this with me:

Jesus, I want my life to have eternal significance, and I believe that is found in knowing you. I believe that in you is found eternal life, life to the full. I believe that apart from faith in you, I will die in my sins, separated from God for all eternity. But I believe that you love me so much that you died on the cross in my place, taking the penalty for my sin, and that you rose from the grave, conquering death. I turn from my sinful, self-centered way of life and I trust in you as my Savior and Lord, and commit my life to you today. Amen.