

www.Ready.God

Joshua 23:14-16, 24:14-15 ¹

The recent strong earthquakes in California have brought emergency preparedness to the forefront of our consciousness once again . . . as if floods, wildfires, tornadoes, and hurricane season were not enough to accomplish that. And from time to time, you probably see billboards or hear ads promoting the government website, www.ready.gov as a source of information for achieving such preparedness.

As we make our way through the Bible book by book, we've now zipped through the Five Books of Moses and have come to the book of Joshua. In the text we considered last Sunday, Moses was getting the people ready for a transition of leadership and for their entry into the Promised Land. In today's text, at the end of the book of Joshua, Joshua has led the people for many years and is preparing them for his own death.

In his final speech to the nation, Joshua was talking about spiritual readiness when he told them, "*Now fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your ancestors worshiped beyond the Euphrates 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 ancestors served beyond the Euphrates, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD***" (Joshua 24:14-15).

Spiritual readiness is about hope and anticipation. It has to do with recognizing that God is not through with us, either individually or collectively, as His representatives in the world. And as it was with ancient Israel, so it is with us today. God has something important for us to do—even though we might not be clear about what it is at the moment—and God is already at work in and through our congregation to accomplish this purpose.

Spiritual readiness has to do with not being satisfied with seeing God working *somewhere* else through *someone* else but being committed instead to seeing God work through me and us right *here and now*. We can be very grateful that God continues to invite us to join the divine mission of reconciliation and of pushing back the Darkness in this old world.

Our purpose as God's people in the twenty-first century continues to be to live for God's glory, so rather than thinking of www.ready.gov, I've called this message www.Ready.God. In order to become who God calls us to be, you and I must grow more deeply in love with God and more deeply in love with one another—the first and second commandments—so that we also grow more deeply in love with that which and with those whom God loves.

God is already building a spiritual wave beneath us, a wave whose full shape and character is yet to be revealed. And speaking of waves causes me to think of a nautical metaphor that will give shape to my thoughts this morning—I know that surprises you 😊.

Rabbi Bernstein spent the first week of his retirement in Charleston, South Carolina, which is where I was stationed in the Navy. I've been up and down the Cooper River on a destroyer many times as we navigated the six miles between the Navy base and the ocean. Sometimes I was managing the engines in the bowels of the ship, and sometimes I was driving the ship. Although the engines were fascinating, driving was more fun.

You may know that, in the U.S., the deep water of a river channel is marked by the Coast Guard with pairs of large orange rectangles called range markers. On each leg of a navigable river, the fastest way to determine where the ship is in relation to the center of the channel is to

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on July 14, 2019.

look at the alignment of the range markers both fore and aft. If the range markers form a straight line, then the ship is in the center of the channel, which is where you always want to be. I've told you before that running your ship aground can ruin your whole day!

I'd like to suggest to you that discerning God's will and guidance in our lives, both individually and together, is a lot like watching range markers. When the markers begin to line up, we're nearing the center, and it seems to me that there are four range markers we'll do well to watch as we seek to discover what God is up to in this season of our church's life.

The first of these range markers is **OPPORTUNITY**. What opportunities are before us, and of these, which should we pursue?

Now if God is in an opportunity, that opportunity tends to have three characteristics. The first of these is that God's guidance is almost always brief and to the point. It's **simple**. We could probably state the purpose for which God is getting us spiritually ready in just a sentence or two. God's first word to Abram long ago was of that sort . . .

Abram had been praying on the mountain, as he often did. When he came back down for breakfast, he said to his wife, "Sarai, we're going to move." That was simple—just four words.

"What! Where are we going?"

"Don't know."

"How long will we be gone?"

"Don't know."

"Will we ever come back?"

"Don't know."

"So Abram departed as the LORD had instructed him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he left Haran. He took his wife, Sarai, his nephew Lot, and all his wealth . . . and finally arrived in Canaan"—the Promised Land (Genesis 12:4-5).

Our text in Joshua is a continuation of that same story. Some six hundred years had passed since Abram and Sarai moved to Canaan, with Israel's slavery in Egypt occupying most of those years. Now Abraham and Sarah's descendants had become a great nation, and they were in the Promised Land once again.

A God-sent opportunity is usually simple . . . and it usually seems to us to be **impossible**, just as conquering Canaan seemed to Israel. When God speaks, we can't see how we could possibly do what's being asked of us. We don't seem to have the necessary skill or resources, and we're afraid to make the attempt.

In his hugely popular study guide, *Experiencing God*, Henry Blackaby cautioned that no matter how impossible things look, we should "never, ever determine the truth of a situation by looking at the circumstances."² In the life of faith, we don't evaluate our situation based simply on what we can see at the moment. We put our trust in the promises of God, knowing that if God calls us to something, God will get us through it.

Hudson Taylor, the great missionary to China in the nineteenth century, put it this way: "There are three stages in the work of God: impossible; difficult; and done." Here's a recent story of that same kind from Iran:

² Henry Blackaby, *Experiencing God: Knowing and Doing the Will of God* (Nashville: LifeWay), p. 100.

A Christian pastor and his wife stopped in a small Iranian village to buy some water, and as the pastor got out of the car, he noticed a man with a machine gun leaning against the front of the store. The pastor's wife assessed the situation and handed her husband a Bible. "Give that man this Bible," she said. That was simple, but her husband replied, "I don't think so!"

She persisted: "I'm serious. Give it to him. Please, give him the Bible."

"Okay, I'll pray about it."

The pastor went into the shop, purchased the water, climbed back into the car, and started to drive away. His wife looked at him and said, "You didn't give him the Bible, did you?"

"No, I prayed about it and it wasn't the right thing to do"—because doing such a thing as that would be impossible.

"You should have given him the Bible," she said, and then she bowed her head and started praying. At that point, her husband turned the car around and told his wife, "Fine! If you want me to die, I will die."

When they arrived back at the store, the man with the machine gun was still leaning against the wall. The pastor walked up to the man and handed him the Bible. When the man opened it and saw that it was a Bible, he began to cry.

"I don't live here," he said. "I had to walk for three days in order to get to this village. But three days ago an angel appeared to me and told me to walk to this village and wait until someone had given me the Book of Life. Thank you for giving me this book."³

That story also illustrates the third characteristic of a God-sent opportunity. God-sent opportunities are *simple, impossible . . .* and **persistent**. No matter how much we try to avoid such opportunities, to duck them, to cover them up, they simply will not go away. We find God's call always at the edge of our consciousness, with God's quiet Voice restating it over and over, sometimes even in our dreams.

Now some of you may be thinking that such simple, impossible, and persistent ideas might be nothing more than the arrogance and obsession of an ego that has lost touch with reality, and that's certainly possible. The other three range markers are protections against that.

The second range marker, after *OPPORTUNITY*, is **GOD'S WORD**. Is this opportunity consistent with the teaching of the Bible, especially with the New Testament, and most especially with the teaching of Jesus? God will never ask you, or me, or us, to do anything that's inconsistent with the revealed Truth of the Bible . . . but of course we won't know what that Truth is unless we're serious students of God's Word. It is most unwise to try to navigate life without the map God has provided, and many lives have met shipwreck through that neglect.

After *OPPORTUNITY* and *GOD'S WORD*, the third range marker is **GOD'S KINGDOM**. Does this opportunity help God's Kingdom to "*come on earth as it is in heaven*," as Jesus taught us to pray (Matthew 6:10), or is this something that honesty would have to call self-interest? Does it lift up Jesus, or does it lift up me, or us? One of my teachers used to remind us that "No one can, at one and the same time, leave the impression that he or she is clever AND that Jesus is mighty to save."

Finally, the fourth range marker is the peace of **GOD'S SPIRIT**. If God is in an opportunity, we'll have spiritual peace about pursuing it, even if we have to move forward with unanswered questions and lots of challenges and loose ends. We will have an inner confidence that we are on the right path.

³ Michael Ramsden, "An Uncompromising Faith Lived Out with Grace," *Just Thinking* (1-26-09). That pastor became a courageous witness for Christ, and later, along with many other Iranian Christians, he was martyred for his faith.

George Mueller was one of the great prayer warriors of the nineteenth century. He lived in Bristol, England, and he transformed that city through his commitment to the care of orphans, long before such care was considered a Christian duty. Here are Mueller's guidelines for discerning the will of God:

"I seek at the beginning to get my heart into such a state that it has no will of its own in regard to a given matter. Nine-tenths of the trouble with people generally is just here. Nine-tenths of the difficulties are overcome when our hearts are ready to do the knowledge of what God's will is.

"Having done this, I do not leave the result to feeling or simple impression. If so, I make myself liable to great delusions. I seek the Will of the Spirit of God through, or in connection with, the Word of God. The Spirit and the Word must be combined. If I look to the Spirit alone without the Word, I lay myself open to great delusions also. If the Holy Ghost guides us at all, He will do it according to the Scriptures and never contrary to them.

"Next I take into account providential circumstances. These often plainly indicate God's Will in connection with His Word and Spirit. I ask God in prayer to reveal His Will to me aright.

"Thus, (1) through prayer to God, (2) the study of the Word, and (3) reflection, I come to a deliberate judgment according to the best of my ability and knowledge, and if my mind is thus at peace, and continues so after two or three more petitions, I proceed accordingly."⁴

That sounds a great deal like our four range markers of **OPPORTUNITY, GOD'S WORD, GOD'S KINGDOM,** and **GOD'S SPIRIT.** When these line up, before and behind, we can be confident that we're close to the center of God's purposes for our lives, individually and together.⁵

One more story and we're done. A professor was arriving to speak at a military base one December and a soldier named Ralph had been sent to pick him up at the airport. As they walked toward the baggage claim area, Ralph kept wandering off. He went over to help an older woman whose suitcase had fallen open. He lifted up two toddlers so they could talk to Santa Claus. He gave directions to someone who looked lost. And each time he came back to the professor with a smile on his face.

"Where did you learn that?" the professor asked.

"Learn what?" Ralph responded.

"Where did you learn to live like that?"

"Oh, during the war, I guess." He told the professor about his time in combat as a demolition expert whose job it was to clear mine fields, and about how he watched his friends blow up before his eyes . . . one after the other.

"I learned to live 'between steps,'" he said. "I never knew whether my next step would be my last one, so I learned to squeeze everything I could from the moments between when I picked

⁴ Blackaby, p. 34.

⁵ In those times when the fog just will not clear, and decisions have to be made anyway, I've found considerable strength in a prayer by Thomas Merton: "My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone" (from *Thoughts in Solitude* [New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Cudahy, 1976], p. 83).

my foot up and when I put it down again. Every step became a whole new world, and I guess I've been living that way ever since."⁶ Ralph had discovered not only www.ready.gov but www.Ready.God as well.

Paul liked to refer to Christians as "soldiers,"⁷ and one of the chief characteristics of good soldiers is that they're ready for action at a moment's notice. Indeed, military folk spend most of their time achieving and maintaining "readiness." There's an old hymn that makes this same point:

Ready to suffer grief or pain, ready to stand the test;
Ready to stay at home and send others if He sees best.

Ready to speak, ready to think, ready with heart and brain;
Ready to stand where He sees fit, ready to stand the strain.

Ready to go, ready to stay, ready my place to fill;
Ready for service, lowly or great, ready to do His will.⁸

My friends, faithful stewardship of God-sent opportunities requires us to stretch into new ways of following Jesus so that others can also come to know the joy, the peace, the purpose, and the Hope that we have found in Him. And no matter how young or old we are, God continues to call us to keep investing our lives in those places and at those boundaries where the transforming, Eternal Kingdom is being born.

Yes, God has something for us to do; and when God calls us, the only appropriate answer is, "**When do we leave?**"

Benediction

May God bless you with discomfort at easy answers,
half-truths, and superficial relationships so that you may live deep within your heart.
May God bless you with anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people,
so that you may wish for justice, freedom, and peace.
May God bless you with enough foolishness to believe that you can make a difference
in this world, so that you can do what others claim cannot be done.⁹

⁶ Barbara Brown Taylor, in *Fresh Illustrations for Preaching and Teaching from Leadership Journal* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997).

⁷ 1 Corinthians 9:7; Philippians 2:25; 2 Timothy 2:3-4; Philemon 1:2.

⁸ "Ready," words by A. C. Palmer, tune, TILLMAN, by Charles D. Tillman, 1903.

⁹ A Franciscan blessing, quoted by Gordon MacDonald in *Leadership Weekly* (3-31-03)