



Sermon Series by Season

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Vol. 1 Part C
Summer

“Joshua and opportunities”

“Two parables of kindness”

“Elijah and Elisha”

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The purpose of this volume.

Churches are often vacant for long periods or are in locations where it is difficult to find pastors to fill the pulpit when they are vacant. This series of four books is my humble attempt to help vacant congregations. The fifty-nine sermons, divided into four sections by the seasons, will give congregations an option on Sundays that it is hard to get a pastor. The sermons are arranged in series covering a specific section of scripture or topic. Some are meant to cover a season. Others will fill the long weeks between Pentecost and the beginning of Advent.

This is the third of four volumes of sermons that will cover the church year. The 59 sermons in the volumes can be used during the season indicated or as a sermon series at any time of the year. There is no cost to use these sermons and so I encourage you to freely use them with or without citation of authorship. God gave them as a gift to us at Bethany and we want to pass them on to you. Feel free to pass them on to others so that as many as possible may share in what the Lord has given all of us. You are also allowed to edit them to fit your specific location or your style of preaching. May the Lord bless you as you learn and grow from His word.

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Joshua – Use the opportunities that God gives you.

What are God's people to do when God gives them opportunities in life and ministry? In the first seven chapters of the Old Testament book of Joshua, we see how God led the Israelites as their faith was challenged by the promises God was fulfilling before their eyes. First, Joshua is encouraged by the Lord to have faith that God was about to keep the promise made centuries before to Abraham. Next, the people's faith was inspired by a pagan woman and challenged by a swollen river. If their faith did not cause them to step forward, all the opportunities would be lost. God further challenged His people and taught them that the battle for Palestine was His and not theirs by conquering a walled city in a unique way. Finally, they would learn the hard way that opportunities cease if God's people don't obey Him completely. As churches and individuals consider the opportunities God gives them, they would do well to learn how to trust and obey the Lord with Joshua and the Israelites.

1. Call to Courage

Joshua 1:1-18

Big idea: Courage comes when you believe in what God can do.

Joshua 1:1-18 (NIV)

¹ After the death of Moses the servant of the LORD, the LORD said to Joshua son of Nun, Moses' aide: ² "Moses my servant is dead. Now then, you and all these people, get ready to cross the Jordan River into the land I am about to give to them--to the Israelites. ³ I will give you every place where you set your foot, as I promised Moses. ⁴ Your territory will extend from the desert to Lebanon, and from the great river, the Euphrates--all the Hittite country--to the Great Sea on the west. ⁵ No one will be able to stand up against you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you. ⁶ "Be strong and courageous, because you will lead these people to inherit the land I swore to their forefathers to give them. ⁷ Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go. ⁸ Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful. ⁹ Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go." ¹⁰ So Joshua ordered the officers of the people: ¹¹ "Go through the camp and tell the people, 'Get your supplies ready. Three days from now you will cross the Jordan here to go in and take possession of the land the LORD your God is giving you for your own.'" ¹² But to the Reubenites, the Gadites and the half-tribe of Manasseh, Joshua said, ¹³ "Remember the command that Moses the servant of the LORD gave you: 'The LORD your God is giving you rest and has granted you this land.' ¹⁴ Your wives, your children and your livestock may stay in the land that Moses gave you east of the Jordan, but all your fighting men, fully armed, must cross over ahead of your brothers. You are to help your brothers ¹⁵ until the LORD gives them rest, as he has done for you, and until they too have taken possession of the land that the LORD your God is giving them. After that, you may go back and occupy your own land, which Moses the servant of the LORD gave you east of the Jordan toward the sunrise." ¹⁶ Then they answered Joshua, "Whatever you have commanded us we will do, and wherever you send us we will go. ¹⁷ Just as we fully obeyed Moses, so we will obey you. Only may the LORD your God be with you as he was with Moses. ¹⁸ Whoever rebels against your word and does not obey your words, whatever you may command them, will be put to death. Only be strong and courageous!"

Opportunity is at hand – Don't hesitate.

Offerings are up. Attendance is up. God is telling your congregation that He is ready to do something amazing, and you better be prepared to go on the ride of your life. It is exciting and something that puts a knot in your stomach. Are you ready, and will you seize the opportunity God has given you? I appreciate how Joshua must have felt. A half million people were looking to him for direction after 40 years of wandering in the desert. God is standing before him and saying here is the land. It is time. Follow me this way, and you will see a land of milk and honey, and it will all be yours.

Moses may have prepared him for the last 40 years. He may be the heir apparent to Moses and be recognized by God and the people. That doesn't make it easy. He has to go forth boldly and go forward in the right way. He is nothing without the Lord. The first step toward seizing any opportunity is to let God encourage us and then for us to encourage others. Hesitant and fearful people get nowhere. A divided

congregation where some are willing, and some are cautious will never seize the opportunity. Let us learn from Joshua, and then let us go forward with the Lord.

God encourages Joshua and His people.

A. God describes the opportunity v. 3 *I will give you every place where you set your foot, as I promised Moses.*

The opportunity lies right before them. God had already given them the land. He had described it to Abraham and Moses. He reaffirmed to Joshua what the borders of the land were. It was a vast area from modern-day Syria down to Egypt and from the Mediterranean far to the east. However, there was a catch. They would only get the land that they could put their feet on. They must be willing to go and claim land in the name of the Lord. They must fight for the land and not be satisfied with a little portion. Think big as God has done. I will give it to you, and you will show me to the world.

Every church has opportunities for the next year and the next couple of years. We need to search the scripture to remember God's promises. We need to be people of prayer to learn the boundaries of our opportunity. God will help us figure that out. We need to ask Him what He wants. But, there is a catch for us. We must step out in faith. We must let our feet and our hands touch this new opportunity. Nothing will happen if we sit here and wait for God to give it to us with no effort. You and I have to move into new territory. We have the people and the resources. God will give us whatever we still lack. Move forward.

B. God promises to be with them v. 5 *As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you.*

God now makes a significant promise. He will be with Joshua like He was with Moses. Joshua saw God talk to Moses on the mountain. Joshua saw God do miracles through Moses that were amazing. Joshua saw God give Moses victories over the people across the Jordan. Now God would do that with him. Notice that God doesn't explain how He will work miracles. God doesn't tell him how He will defeat Jericho or overcome the giants of the south. God's people live on promises and not explanations. It was enough that God promised that He would be with them because God was great.

The list of promises that we have in the Bible is overwhelming. We need to claim them as we look for and follow the opportunities. We need to pray for the promises and believe that God wants the people around us to know Him as their Lord and to grow in their faith. It would be nice if God gave a detailed manual on how we are to accomplish His will. He doesn't. Our Lord teaches us about himself so that we can trust Him. He shows us in scripture all the victories he has had for His people, so we know we can have them too. God will be with us. That is all we need to know.

C. God Encourages His people to get moving v.6 *"Be strong and courageous, because you will lead these people to inherit the land I swore to their forefathers to give them.*

Before God could work miracles, Joshua and the people had to believe and follow. There is no substitute for faith. God seldom gets things done through fainthearted and timid people. Three times in this passage, God tells Joshua to be strong and courageous. This courage is not confidence in himself or the people. It is confidence in God. God is saying to rely on me. Trust what I can do. Show your faith, and others will follow. Go forward knowing I will be with you, and you will win battle after battle. If you start doubting me, things will get ugly.

As we see opportunities ahead, we need to look at what God can do and not at what we can do. Joshua could not defeat the people of Palestine. God could. We cannot minister in the neighborhood or build a Sunday school. God can. Being courageous is looking at God and not at yourselves. Courage is facing challenges with the power of a machine gun when the enemy has a bow and arrow. God is that much mightier than anything we will encounter. Self-confidence will cause ruin. Godly confidence will give us a chance to do great things because God wants them done.

D. Read and follow the Word v. 8. *Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful.*

God gives Joshua a warning. Don't forget to study the book of the law. Moses had written down the first five books of our Bible, and Joshua was to fill his mind and life with them. He was to read and study God's word. Joshua was to talk about it with the people. He was to ponder it and keep it in his heart. He had to be in the Bible to know what God wanted and how God wanted it done. Godly success comes when you achieve Godly goals and live as Godly people. Only when you live the Bible will you have the character and courage to do great things.

I would give us the same warning. We will only do something if the church is in the word. The Bible class has grown. It must expand more. Small groups exist. They must multiply and increase in membership. Home devotions must fill our homes. We must find a way to develop all of them so that all of us have Bible hearts. It will not be enough if a few are in the scriptures. We all must have courage. We all must be prayer warriors. We all must have the right attitudes and the power of God working in our lives. If we don't, expect us to wander in the desert like the Israelites did the first time.

Respond to God in faith and action.

Believe that God is ready to do something great v. v11 *"Go through the camp and tell the people, 'Get your supplies ready. Three days from now you will cross the Jordan here to go in and take possession of the land the LORD your God is giving you for your own.'"*

Having received encouragement from the Lord, Joshua now encourages and calls the people to believe as well. Forty years before this, Joshua and Caleb challenged the people to believe God could conquer the land and the people doubted. Now Joshua spoke again, and the people had to believe and act differently this time. Get ready. Gather your supplies. This flood-swollen river is nothing. God will cross it. The giants are nothing. God is bigger. Gather supplies and be ready because God will do something great, and you must be prepared to follow Him into the Promised Land.

Having heard the words of the Lord, I encourage you to be ready. As we travel through these first chapters of Joshua, we are on a journey and will learn what to do with opportunity. Be ready. Get into the word. Start creating new small groups and a second Bible class. Your hearts must be prepared. Gather your dreams and submit them to the Lord in prayer. Start doing little things and let the Lord make them blossom into greater opportunities. There is a reason God gives a church new people and new resources. Believe, and God will make His will happen. You will see miracles from His hands.

Let us make a pledge to accept God's Opportunity v. 16. *Then they answered Joshua, "Whatever you have commanded us we will do, and wherever you send us we will go."*

When they heard of God's encouragement and saw the faith of Joshua, the people pledged to follow Joshua and claim the opportunity. This act of commitment was in stark contrast to their failure forty years before. Now they believed, and now they were ready. They accepted that God could defeat the enemy. They would be in the word, so they knew what God wanted and where he wanted them to go. They would follow the Lord even if he asked for the impossible. They pledged themselves on the pain of death to follow Joshua and God.

Let this church pledge this day to be in the word more fully and to trust our Lord. There is a reason a church can see a drastic increase in new people from the community or have additional funding. God is ready to do something special. The future is upon us. We are at our own River Jordan, and God has a plan. So let us go forward trusting in Him and confident of His direction and victory. *"Be strong and courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you that you may be successful wherever you go."*

2. Faith triumphs

Joshua 2:1-16

Big idea: One person's faith can change everything

Joshua 2:1-16 (NIV)

¹ Then Joshua son of Nun secretly sent two spies from Shittim. "Go, look over the land," he said, "especially Jericho." So they went and entered the house of a prostitute named Rahab and stayed there. ² The king of Jericho was told, "Look! Some of the Israelites have come here tonight to spy out the land." ³ So the king of Jericho sent this message to Rahab: "Bring out the men who came to you and entered your house, because they have come to spy out the whole land." ⁴ But the woman had taken the two men and hidden them. She said, "Yes, the men came to me, but I did not know where they had come from." ⁵ At dusk, when it was time to close the city gate, the men left. I don't know which way they went. Go after them quickly. You may catch up with them." ⁶ (But she had taken them up to the roof and hidden them under the stalks of flax she had laid out on the roof.) ⁷ So the men set out in pursuit of the spies on the road that leads to the fords of the Jordan, and as soon as the pursuers had gone out, the gate was shut. ⁸ Before the spies lay down for the night, she went up on the roof ⁹ and said to them, "I know that the LORD has given this land to you and that a great fear of you has fallen on us, so that all who live in this country are melting in fear because of you. ¹⁰ We have heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Red Sea for you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to Sihon and Og, the two kings of the Amorites east of the Jordan, whom you completely destroyed. ¹¹ When we heard of it, our hearts melted and everyone's courage failed because of you, for the LORD your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below. ¹² Now then, please swear to me by the LORD that you will show kindness to my family, because I have shown kindness to you. Give me a sure sign ¹³ that you will spare the lives of my father and mother, my brothers and sisters, and all who belong to them, and that you will save us from death." ¹⁴ "Our lives for your lives!" the men assured her. "If you don't tell what we are doing, we will treat you kindly and faithfully when the LORD gives us the land." ¹⁵ So she let them down by a rope through the window, for the house she lived in was part of the city wall. ¹⁶ Now she had said to them, "Go to the hills so the pursuers will not find you. Hide yourselves there three days until they return, and then go on your way."

The lowly harlot becomes the hero by faith.

She was a harlot, which our society would look down on, but her society did not see her as so disgraceful. Such women often had lodgings in their homes connected to their occupation but available to all. It was there that God led the spies to hide out. Such a person was a perfect place to get information about the town and its feelings toward the mob of foreigners camped only about two miles outside the city on the other side of the Jordan River. It was a place to ask questions while remaining anonymous.

Remarkably, God welcomed a woman of such an occupation into the Israelite nation. She would even become an ancestor of King David and Jesus himself. Such are the workings of God, who takes the lowly and makes them his own. Rahab's story is about how one person's faith changes everything. It is the story of opportunity for her and the people of God. It is a story that reminds us that God can do great things through people who seem lowly to the rest of the world. Opportunity is possible with faith.

The power of faith

A. faith brings courage v. 4 *But the woman had taken the two men and hidden them. She said, "Yes, the men came to me, but I did not know where they had come from."*

Rahab chose to follow the true God and leave the gods of Jericho behind. The fact that she welcomed the spies and hid them from the King of Jericho is evidence of her faith. It is also an act of treason and would have resulted in her being slain if she had been discovered. In that day, she became an Israelite and not a Canaanite. She wanted to belong to the people of Israel and their God. She was convinced that the

true God would take the land and that opposition to Him would be in vain. She believed in the power of God, and it caused her to put her life on the line.

Those who have faith in the Lord will take risks because they believe in what God can do. They will have the courage to speak to friends and neighbors about Jesus. They will take on projects that the Lord has for the church and the community because they know God has a purpose. They commit to the Lord and make sacrifices in their own life because they want to be close to Him and be part of His plan for the world. Others may think they are too insignificant, but God sees the potential in every person who puts Him first and commits to His service.

B. Faith sees what others miss v. 9 *"I know that the LORD has given this land to you and that a great fear of you has fallen on us so that all who live in this country are melting in fear because of you.*

Rahab saw what others had missed. She knew how the Lord had dried up the Red Sea and destroyed the Egyptian army. She knew how the Lord had kept these people alive in the desert. She even knew how the Lord had defeated the kings east of the Jordan. In her mind, this was one great God. She was drawn to God, while the others in Jericho were afraid. She was amazed at God, while the Israelites had become apathetic to the miracles of their God. She saw what others missed and longed to have this God as her own. She wanted to belong to this God and be one of His people.

Those with the faith of Rahab don't take what God is doing for granted. They are amazed at how he changes the lives of people around them. They are astonished at how God provides for His people and protects them from the things that harm us. They see the hand of God in what is happening. They want to be part of the miracles. They want to see the Lord revolutionize their community, so it is filled with His love. They want to see children in their families come to know Jesus so He can change their lives daily. They believe that God continues to work miracles and can work miracles through them.

C. Faith inspires others v. 11 *When we heard of it, our hearts melted and everyone's courage failed because of you, for the LORD your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below.*

Her confession must have inspired the spies. Here was a pagan of the city confessing her faith in a God she had never seen but only heard of His deeds. She saw God as the true God over the whole world and not just a God belonging to one race or people. He could be her God, too. She confessed that God was more powerful than all the gods of the Canaanite people. He was a God who was stronger and superior to the gods she had worshipped. His mighty acts had brought fear into the hearts of the people of Jericho. If the spies had any doubts about God, her confession put them to an end.

Such faith inspires others to serve and to work toward God's ministry. It is the person who believes in what God is doing so much that their faith spreads. They look at the challenges ahead as being small for the Lord. They see the difference this opportunity will make in the lives of others. They throw themselves into the challenge and believe that God can and will do miracles. We need to go forward and believe in what God wants to do. As this person of faith steps onward, others step with them because they all start seeing what the Lord can do and believe God will do it.

D. Faith shows concern about others v. 12. *Now then, please swear to me by the LORD that you will show kindness to my family because I have shown kindness to you.*

Rahab's faith did not stop with herself. She was concerned about her family. She wanted assurances from the two spies that her family would be safe when the city was taken. She believed the Lord would accept her whole family as part of His people. To that end, she would gather her entire family together in one place, sharing her faith that the Lord God was going to take the city. They would have their lives spared and their future secure because the spies promised that God could and would do it.

Faith changes the world by starting with the people nearest to us. We show concern about our family and want them to belong to God as we do. We know that God can change their future. He can give them heaven and change each day as they live in His love and protection. Faith is concerned about others and

wants them to have what we have. Often that is our first opportunity. We can tell them about what the Lord has done for us and let the Spirit work through our enthusiasm about God. We want God's mercy for those we love, not just ourselves.

What faith can do.

Her faith brought confidence to others v. 24 *They said to Joshua, "The LORD has surely given the whole land into our hands; all the people are melting in fear because of us."*

You have to believe that God led the spies to her house so that He could save her and her family. You have to assume that God led the spies there so that they could be encouraged by this lowliest of women. Her faith inspired them and was a chance to see what the Lord could do. As a result, they came back to the camp with renewed confidence and enthusiasm. Her report of the terror of Jericho's people reminded them of the power of their God. The Holy Spirit used her words to encourage the Israelites to enter the Promised Land.

We may think that we are too small or unimportant to make a difference, but it is often the people that others think are insignificant with whom God can do the most. Then, opportunity comes, and their faith shines. They believe in God and what He can do and encourage others to believe as they do. Like Rahab, they are not afraid, and they boldly go forward. They do so, in part, because they want the joy of working with the Lord and the pleasure of seeing others come to know Jesus as their savior. It is remarkable what one person can do if they are willing to trust the Lord.

One person's faith can change everything.

Rahab is one of only two women mentioned in the list of the faithful in Hebrews 11. The other is Sarah, the wife of Abraham. The list is a testament to her faith and the woman she became in the Israelite community. Her faith inspired others and saved her whole family from death. One person can make a difference if they walk forward in faith. No person is too small or has too shady a past for them to be used by God. Their faith overcomes the shortcomings, for they do the miracles through faith in God.

As we move forward with God's opportunity, I want us to think of Rahab. She transformed her life and the lives of her family. She saved the spies and the mission from God. She did it all by faith in a God she knew would accept her even though she was not an Israelite. One person can do much if they do it with faith in God. They can change the community and their family around them. But, they have to believe and be willing to risk it all on God, knowing God can do wonders through them. Amen.

3. God leads the way

Joshua 3:1-17

Big idea: Faith goes forward to where God is working.

Joshua 3:1-17 (NIV)

¹ Early in the morning Joshua and all the Israelites set out from Shittim and went to the Jordan, where they camped before crossing over. ² After three days the officers went throughout the camp, ³ giving orders to the people: "When you see the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God, and the priests, who are Levites, carrying it, you are to move out from your positions and follow it. ⁴ Then you will know which way to go, since you have never been this way before. But keep a distance of about a thousand yards between you and the ark; do not go near it." ⁵ Joshua told the people, "Consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow the LORD will do amazing things among you." ⁶ Joshua said to the priests, "Take up the ark of the covenant and pass on ahead of the people." So they took it up and went ahead of them. ⁷ And the LORD said to Joshua, "Today I will begin to exalt you in the eyes of all Israel, so they may know that I am with you as I was with Moses. ⁸ Tell the priests who carry the ark of the covenant: 'When you reach the edge of the Jordan's waters, go and stand in the river.'" ⁹ Joshua said to the Israelites, "Come here and listen to the words of the LORD your God. ¹⁰ This is how you will know that the living God is among you and that he will certainly drive out before you the Canaanites, Hittites, Hivites, Perizzites, Girgashites, Amorites and Jebusites. ¹¹ See, the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth will go into the Jordan ahead of you. ¹² Now then, choose twelve men from the tribes of Israel, one from each tribe. ¹³ And as soon as the priests who carry the ark of the LORD--the Lord of all the earth--set foot in the Jordan, its waters flowing downstream will be cut off and stand up in a heap." ¹⁴ So when the people broke camp to cross the Jordan, the priests carrying the ark of the covenant went ahead of them. ¹⁵ Now the Jordan is at flood stage all during harvest. Yet as soon as the priests who carried the ark reached the Jordan and their feet touched the water's edge, ¹⁶ the water from upstream stopped flowing. It piled up in a heap a great distance away, at a town called Adam in the vicinity of Zarethan, while the water flowing down to the Sea of the Arabah (the Salt Sea) was completely cut off. So the people crossed over opposite Jericho. ¹⁷ The priests who carried the ark of the covenant of the LORD stood firm on dry ground in the middle of the Jordan, while all Israel passed by until the whole nation had completed the crossing on dry ground.

Faith leads to action.

Salvation is just the beginning. The Lord had saved the people of Israel from slavery forty years before this. He had tried to give them a new life and a home, and the people had recoiled in fear. Now, that new life was just across the swollen river in front of them. They must have wondered how they would cross the river. Two spies could swim their way across if they were strong men. A million men, women, and children with all their worldly possessions would never make it across the river. It was time to believe that God could do more than they expected.

Last week we saw the faith of Rahab. Now it was time for the nation of Israel to have faith. God saved His people so they might be a mighty nation and live by faith. Unbelief says to play it safe. Faith says that we should go forward to where God is working. Too many today think that religion is only about heaven or hell. It is more. It is about life. It is about having the faith to cross into God's Promised Land for you. It is about going forward so that you might have a life now and not just eternal life later. Faith leads to action and great blessings.

God shows the way

A. God goes first so we can follow v. 3 *"When you see the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God, and the priests, who are Levites, carrying it, you are to move out from your positions and follow it.*

God would lead them and open the way to His Promised Land. They would not tell God where to go but would follow Him daily wherever He would guide them. God would conquer the land. God would accomplish the impossible for them. It was not by their strength but by His. They would follow a thousand yards behind the ark. Ten football fields length would separate them from the Almighty God. It would be a show of respect. It would also be so that everyone could see what God was about to do. For this day was to be an encouragement for the people. It would show what was possible for the God who led them out of Egypt.

God must go first wherever we go. We can't tell Him what it means to be a Christian or define what the church should do or how it should look. If God does not go first, we will fail. Our promised land as a church and as a person comes by His grace and direction. May we show Him honor as they did. May we wait for days or weeks to be prepared so that we move when God shows us where. May we open our eyes so that we might see what God is doing and gain the faith to move forward and take the opportunity that the Lord is giving us.

B. Make yourself ready to receive God's blessings v.5 *Joshua told the people, "Consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow the LORD will do amazing things among you."*

The people had a day to prepare. At the river's edge, they bathed and changed their clothes to signify that this would be a new beginning. It was a way of honoring God by putting on the Sunday best. It was a spiritual time in which they ensured their hearts were ready for God's gifts. This preparation was a time to turn their heart to God and prepare for His commands. It was like a bride getting ready for a wedding or a knight preparing to meet the King. The people put aside everything else and focused on the Lord in anticipation of something great. Their hearts must have tingled as they got ready for God's miracle.

Faith still must get ready. You don't take God's opportunities lightly. You pray, and you study. You fast, and you ponder. You give it your best instead of your leftovers. God's blessings will be the biggest thing in your life. People wait for hours for the new I-phone. We should do the same when God calls us. Too often, God gets the leftovers. People miss church when other things get in the way. Bible class or personal devotions take too much time. Faith says to prepare for what God has next for you. Faith tells you to honor God by putting Him first; otherwise, you miss what He has waiting for you.

C. Leaders need to get their feet wet first v. 6 *Joshua said to the priests, "Take up the ark of the covenant and pass on ahead of the people." So they took it up and went ahead of them.*

The priests were responsible for stepping into a swollen river carrying the ark. They had to trust that the river before them would be held back just because God said it would. They had to get their feet wet before the Lord would stop the waters, and the riverbed became dry. Across the valley, the people of Jericho watched. Because of the faith of the priests, they would see what the Lord was capable of doing. Because of the priests' faith, the people would watch as the riverbed dried up so they could go through on dry land. They had to believe so that God could work a miracle.

Leaders still have to get their feet wet. They must listen to God, so the congregation knows what to do. They have to step out in faith so that others will follow. Being a leader takes confidence in the Lord. It is a matter of faith and courage that relies on God to do what He has promised. Their job is more critical than they often realize. Leaders step out in faith, and the world watches to see what the Lord can do. Leaders step out in faith, and the congregation watches and follows as miracles develop because the leaders have the confidence to step out, trusting God. Leaders are essential, and they should be respected.

D. People must trust and obey or lose the blessing v. 9 *Joshua said to the Israelites, "Come here and listen to the words of the LORD your God."*

If the Israelites had not followed, they would have lost everything the Lord had in mind. It would have been like it was forty years before when their parents died in the desert. God had given them all the information that they needed. It was up to them to now believe what the Lord was to do. Walking across

the dry river, they would learn what God could do. This day was to be a moment repeating the crossing of the Red Sea forty years before. It was a time to understand that God could defeat the people of Jericho, Bethel, and the rest. In obedience, their faith could grow, and miracles could happen.

When God's people do not trust Him, they lose many of the blessings that God wants to give. The blessings are not on this side of the Jordan. They are across the river. Too many Christians wonder why God is not blessing them. The truth is that they are often not following. They expect to be served by God instead of following Him. Each time God asks you to obey, He will teach you to trust even more. You see one miracle and learn what God can do. You see the second and the third, and you learn to trust Him even more till you grow so strong in your faith that you know He can move mountains.

Our response

Obedience is required for miracles to happen v.15 *Now the Jordan is at flood stage all during harvest. Yet as soon as the priests who carried the ark reached the Jordan and their feet touched the water's edge*

During flood season, the Jordan River can grow to be almost a mile wide, yet when the priest's feet touched the water's edge, the river stopped flowing. They would stand in the middle of the riverbed while a million people walked by them with their possessions and flocks. It must have taken hours. The obedience of the priests and the people allowed God to do the miracle. I believe with all my heart that the river would not stop without that step. This day was a test of faith. It was a time for people to grow in faith. God does things so that we have to act to receive the blessings.

We often want the rivers of life dry before we make that first step. God calls us to step out in faith so that miracles can happen. There are few blessings for lazy people in the kingdom of God. They may get salvation by the skin of their teeth, but they will miss most of the blessings God wants to give them. Obedience and action are required for miracles to happen. Churches and people that step forward with prayer and Bible study, giving them strength, will find that God will move mountains for them. They will get their feet wet and suddenly find the dry land they seek. God doesn't disappoint people who trust in Him.

Salvation is just the beginning.

Saving the people from Egypt was just the beginning. Next, God wanted to bring them to the Promised Land. The first time they approached the Promised Land, the people stepped back in fear and were destined to wander and die for forty years. Now, they stepped forward following the Lord, and the Promised Land became theirs. Unbelief says let's go back where it is safe. Faith says let's go ahead and be part of where God works. That took faith. It took leaders willing to step into the water and get their feet wet. It took people ready to follow, not afraid that the water would come rushing at them.

Salvation is just the beginning. Each miracle is another step. The crossing of the Jordan was their first step. Jericho would be the next. Soon there would be step after step until Palestine was theirs. That is how the walk of faith looks in the Christian's life. You step forward, learning God is faithful, and then you step again. There is much that the Lord wants his church to claim in His name. You do that by following Him step by step in faith, believing that the Lord has great things ahead and that He will not fail you. Faith isn't just about heaven. It is about living in the blessings of the Lord every day of your life.

4. Remember God's help

Joshua 4:1-19

Big idea: Remembering God is the key to a better present and future.

Joshua 4:1-19 (NIV)

¹ When the whole nation had finished crossing the Jordan, the LORD said to Joshua, ² "Choose twelve men from among the people, one from each tribe, ³ and tell them to take up twelve stones from the middle of the Jordan from right where the priests stood and to carry them over with you and put them down at the place where you stay tonight." ⁴ So Joshua called together the twelve men he had appointed from the Israelites, one from each tribe, ⁵ and said to them, "Go over before the ark of the LORD your God into the middle of the Jordan. Each of you is to take up a stone on his shoulder, according to the number of the tribes of the Israelites, ⁶ to serve as a sign among you. In the future, when your children ask you, 'What do these stones mean?' ⁷ tell them that the flow of the Jordan was cut off before the ark of the covenant of the LORD. When it crossed the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. These stones are to be a memorial to the people of Israel forever." ⁸ So the Israelites did as Joshua commanded them. They took twelve stones from the middle of the Jordan, according to the number of the tribes of the Israelites, as the LORD had told Joshua; and they carried them over with them to their camp, where they put them down. ⁹ Joshua set up the twelve stones that had been in the middle of the Jordan at the spot where the priests who carried the ark of the covenant had stood. And they are there to this day. ¹⁰ Now the priests who carried the ark remained standing in the middle of the Jordan until everything the LORD had commanded Joshua was done by the people, just as Moses had directed Joshua. The people hurried over, ¹¹ and as soon as all of them had crossed, the ark of the LORD and the priests came to the other side while the people watched. ¹² The men of Reuben, Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh crossed over, armed, in front of the Israelites, as Moses had directed them. ¹³ About forty thousand armed for battle crossed over before the LORD to the plains of Jericho for war. ¹⁴ That day the LORD exalted Joshua in the sight of all Israel; and they revered him all the days of his life, just as they had revered Moses. ¹⁵ Then the LORD said to Joshua, ¹⁶ "Command the priests carrying the ark of the Testimony to come up out of the Jordan." ¹⁷ So Joshua commanded the priests, "Come up out of the Jordan." ¹⁸ And the priests came up out of the river carrying the ark of the covenant of the LORD. No sooner had they set their feet on the dry ground than the waters of the Jordan returned to their place and ran at flood stage as before. ¹⁹ On the tenth day of the first month the people went up from the Jordan and camped at Gilgal on the eastern border of Jericho.

Why memorials?

Memorials are everywhere in this county. There are a dozen significant memorials in Washington, DC, memorials on major battlefields like Gettysburg and Vicksburg, and even the mountain memorial of Mount Rushmore. More and more are being built all the time. Why are they there? They help us remember. They remind us of the people who lost their lives on the battlefield, great presidents, and events that changed the world. With them, we can easily remember the past and its encouragement for us in the present.

Memorials fill the Bible and the church. Joshua would set up several more monuments during his life. Each was to remind the people what the Lord had done. The Christian church has built memorials at Mt. Calvary and the empty tomb in Jerusalem. Lutherans have the doors where the 95 theses were posted as well. Our problem is that we forget God and what He has done for us. When we do, we don't remember to ask Him for help and don't put our trust in God as we should. Remembering the past helps us to conquer the present and have a brighter future. Forget God, and you are doomed to relive the past.

Two Memorials

A. Memorial at Gilgal v. 6-7. *In the future, when your children ask you, 'What do these stones mean?' tell them that the flow of the Jordan was cut off before the ark of the covenant of the LORD. When it crossed the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. These stones are to be a memorial to the people of Israel forever.*

Twelve stones were to be taken from the bottom of the river and set up as a memorial where they camped the first night. Gilgal would be an important city, and people would see this memorial for years. People could touch the stones from the bottom of the river and know the miracle was real. The stones would be in plain sight so that successive generations of children could see what God had done. They would hear the stories and visualize God's power and care for His people. Faith was to be passed on, and the memorial was to do that.

There is power in parents and grandparents telling the stories of the Bible and their lives to the children. We pass on what God did for people like David or Peter. We honestly share our experiences with God and with His great mercy. We show them our God by the way He works on behalf of His people. It can leave lasting impressions just as powerful as many you can take home from Gettysburg or Monticello. Such stories and any artifacts you have from your walk of faith can build the faith of your children. Too often, our children have weak faith because we have not created those memories.

B. Memorial in the Jordan River v. 9 *Joshua set up the twelve stones that had been in the middle of the Jordan at the spot where the priests who carried the ark of the covenant had stood. And they are there to this day.*

Yet, there was a second memorial at the river. The monument at Gilgal would remind them that God had brought them safely to the Promised Land and that it would be theirs now. The second monument in the river reminded them of the past from which the Lord had freed them. The river crossing had brought them life. The days of wandering were over, and slavery in Egypt was finally a distant memory. God had worked a miracle and transformed his people. I picture the people thinking of that every time they saw the stones peak above the water. God freed us from the past.

Luther tells us to remember our baptism. Like the Jordan River did for the Israelites, it is a time when the past is gone. The water in baptism brought about a transformation for all of us. Before we were baptized, we were people of the world who were wandering and lost. Now we are God's children, able to understand his word in the Bible, pray to Him at any time, and live in his protection and care. The baptismal font sits quietly in most churches, and we often don't think of what God did there for us. Yet, it is a memorial for us as much as the cross. It is the time when we received new life.

Two confirmations

C. Joshua as spokesman v. 14 *That day the LORD exalted Joshua in the sight of all Israel; and they revered him all the days of his life, just as they had revered Moses.*

This day was the time of two confirmations as well. First, this was the day that God showed Joshua to be His spokesman. Joshua had conveyed God's instructions, and things happened just as he had said they would. God had worked a miracle, and the people knew that Joshua spoke for God. God did this not to glorify Joshua but rather to show that Joshua talked for God and that the people should follow him when he told them to march around Jericho or deal with the sin of Achan. By following Joshua, they would be following God as much as they had obeyed God by following Moses.

God trains His leaders and expects a great deal from them. He also shows the world that they speak for Him. As they share the message of scripture, people will see changes in their lives. As they set the direction for the church, they will see results from their work. God lets us know who the leaders in the church and the world are that we need to follow. He allows those who are seeking their own glory to fail and those who are seeking to do God's will to have success. Look at how their lives affect others, and you will see whether they speak for the Lord.

D. God as miracle worker v. 18 *And the priests came up out of the river carrying the ark of the covenant of the LORD. No sooner had they set their feet on the dry ground than the waters of the Jordan returned to their place and ran at flood stage as before.*

God showed that the parting of the Jordan River was no fluke by bringing back the flood waters as soon as the priests stepped out on dry land. Some probably thought it was a coincidence that the waters stopped. The second miracle of the water's return showed the hand of God. The people needed to make a firm connection of the miracle to God so they would trust the Lord as He commanded them to take great cities like Jericho or Bethel. He needed them to see without a doubt what the Lord could do. The water returning immediately when the priests stepped out shows God did this miracle.

God still confirms Himself to us if we are looking. He will show us that he is the one who healed someone we love or helped us with a problem. The Lord leaves a footprint for those looking because he wants us to keep asking for His help and believing that He continues to work. He wants us to see that we are not just lucky or that coincidence pulled things together. He wants us to see His hand in the miracles of life so that we give Him praise and learn to trust Him in every difficulty. Our God works in our lives; the more we see it, the more we will come to Him for help.

Two encouragements

Encourage their children v. 21-22 *He said to the Israelites, "In the future when your descendants ask their fathers, 'What do these stones mean?' tell them, 'Israel crossed the Jordan on dry ground.'*

I have had the joy of taking my children to Colonial Williamsburg, Gettysburg, and the Gateway Arch. Each place was a chance to teach them about the history of America so that they would remember what our forefathers did in this country and appreciate their sacrifices. These stones were to remind succeeding generations of the power and love of God. Sadly, as soon as Joshua died, the nation forgot the miracles that God had performed on their behalf. These stones were to be a visual lesson so that parents could tell their children about God generation after generation.

Homes used to have many pictures and symbols on the walls from the Christian faith. Churches were all filled with banners and stained glass windows. Both home and church had plenty of places where the young could say what does this mean? Not so anymore. God is missing, and kids don't know Him. If we want not to lose the next generation, it may be time to do more visuals in church and at home. It will be critical to have those times to talk about Jesus and all He is doing. If we don't, we should not be surprised if we go through time without God as the Israelites did after Joshua's death.

Encourage the world around you v. 24 *He did this so that all the peoples of the earth might know that the hand of the LORD is powerful and so that you might always fear the LORD your God."*

The stones were also meant to show the world how great God was and how He cared for His people. People traveling through Palestine would see the many memorials and have to ask what they meant. It allowed the Israelites to talk about their God and tell how He works. I have been wondering what I could put on my lawn or what we could put here at church so that people passing by might ask about our God. Maybe there could be an outdoor banner with a message that could hang proclaiming the truth about God. Let people wonder about it and ask questions.

It could even be something that we wear. I remember one of the former members who wore ties with Christian symbols that got people talking. I have seen people with intriguing T-shirts that make me ask what it means. Both would be a way of getting people curious about Jesus and starting a conversation. The world needs to know that a God in heaven can work miracles and cares about people. They need to know about Him so they will seek Him out and have his blessings in their life. Remembering God is the key to a better present and future.

5. Do it God's Way

Joshua 6:1-19

Big idea: God's people overcome the world by faith

Joshua 6:1-19 (NIV)

¹ Now Jericho was tightly shut up because of the Israelites. No one went out and no one came in. ² Then the LORD said to Joshua, "See, I have delivered Jericho into your hands, along with its king and its fighting men. ³ March around the city once with all the armed men. Do this for six days. ⁴ Have seven priests carry trumpets of rams' horns in front of the ark. On the seventh day, march around the city seven times, with the priests blowing the trumpets. ⁵ When you hear them sound a long blast on the trumpets, have all the people give a loud shout; then the wall of the city will collapse and the people will go up, every man straight in." ⁶ So Joshua son of Nun called the priests and said to them, "Take up the ark of the covenant of the LORD and have seven priests carry trumpets in front of it." ⁷ And he ordered the people, "Advance! March around the city, with the armed guard going ahead of the ark of the LORD." ⁸ When Joshua had spoken to the people, the seven priests carrying the seven trumpets before the LORD went forward, blowing their trumpets, and the ark of the LORD's covenant followed them. ⁹ The armed guard marched ahead of the priests who blew the trumpets, and the rear guard followed the ark. All this time the trumpets were sounding. ¹⁰ But Joshua had commanded the people, "Do not give a war cry, do not raise your voices, do not say a word until the day I tell you to shout. Then shout!" ¹¹ So he had the ark of the LORD carried around the city, circling it once. Then the people returned to camp and spent the night there. ¹² Joshua got up early the next morning and the priests took up the ark of the LORD. ¹³ The seven priests carrying the seven trumpets went forward, marching before the ark of the LORD and blowing the trumpets. The armed men went ahead of them and the rear guard followed the ark of the LORD, while the trumpets kept sounding. ¹⁴ So on the second day they marched around the city once and returned to the camp. They did this for six days. ¹⁵ On the seventh day, they got up at daybreak and marched around the city seven times in the same manner, except that on that day they circled the city seven times. ¹⁶ The seventh time around, when the priests sounded the trumpet blast, Joshua commanded the people, "Shout! For the LORD has given you the city!" ¹⁷ The city and all that is in it are to be devoted to the LORD. Only Rahab the prostitute and all who are with her in her house shall be spared, because she hid the spies we sent. ¹⁸ But keep away from the devoted things, so that you will not bring about your own destruction by taking any of them. Otherwise you will make the camp of Israel liable to destruction and bring trouble on it. ¹⁹ All the silver and gold and the articles of bronze and iron are sacred to the LORD and must go into his treasury."

God's people do the impossible as God battles evil.

Those who saw Jericho must have thought that conquering the city and the evil inhabitants was impossible. It had two walls and strong defenses behind them. However, faith would do the impossible as it obeyed and followed God. Nothing would be impossible for God. The week would be a test of the people's trust and patience. They may have wanted to defeat Jericho in one day, but God would let the emotions build. By doing so, he would grow their faith, so they trusted him as they took on the rest of Canaan.

There are days when we look around and wonder if the church can survive. We face a culture that has become more ungodly and challenges our beliefs on many fronts. Our faith is tested as well. God doesn't work like we expect He should. He often takes the hard road that builds faithfulness. We need to move forward, trusting God to do the impossible. All those who think God is dead will see He is alive and well. He will show false values and attitudes by letting them crash around those who hold them. Faith will do the impossible as we follow God. God is greater than our enemies.

Fight with victory being certain.

A. God has prepared for victory v. 1 *Now Jericho was tightly shut up because of the Israelites. No one went out and no one came in.*

The people of Jericho must have been in a panic. Their spies certainly had seen how the waters of the Jordan had stopped and let this horde pass like magic. Their leaders knew that a million people were descending on their town of perhaps 50,000. God whipped those fears into a frenzy. God was doing what Israel could not do. He was the inside man working behind the walls preparing the city of Jericho for failure. They didn't have a chance against God. Even the plan of attack was designed to make their fears even greater. God had prepared the scene for victory.

Sadly, it often seems like the church is more afraid of the culture than the culture is of the church. God is still working behind the scenes preparing our neighbor for the witness of the gospel. He is opening doors so that the church can minister in its community. The church and its people have to act believing that God has prepared the way. What stops the church from doing ministry is our fear that we will fail. The world is often trembling behind its walls, ready for the gospel message to change them if we will but act. God has prepared things for victory.

B. Know that it is God's battle v. 2 *Then the LORD said to Joshua, "See, I have delivered Jericho into your hands, along with its king and its fighting men."*

Israel will come to know this day that it is God's battle. It is a battle predicted in the days of Noah, where Noah curses his grandson, Canaan. Throughout the ages, the Canaanites have been immoral people sacrificing their children and engaging in lewd sexual acts as part of their religion. God will give the land to Israel as He promised Abraham. He will take it away from the corrupt Canaanites as punishment for their immorality. Know that Jericho was God's victory over evil. This walled city will fall so that God may keep his promise and so God keeps evil at bay.

It is still God's battle. It is God's battle for the hearts and souls of everyone who does not know Him. He wants as many people to come to heaven and live in His blessings now as He can. It is not up to us to convert people or bring them to faith. We witness, and God must do the rest. It is also not our battle with the evil in our culture. Here, too, we speak the truth in love and let God bring punishment on those who sacrifice and abuse our children in this culture. It is God who must show His presence in a culture that thinks He is dead or unimportant. It is His battle. Know that He will win.

Overcome the enemy by faith.

C. Do it God's way v.3 *March around the city once with all the armed men. Do this for six days.*

Our part in that battle is to follow God. I picture the people thinking God's plan was foolish when they heard it. March around the city for seven days, and it will be yours. Wouldn't it be better to send angels to breach the walls and then we can attack them? But, no, they will know God did it all by this method. He also was using this to teach them. It took courage to march around the city where they would be open to attack. It took endurance to march for seven days doing something that didn't make sense. But they followed God, and it strengthened their faith. Do it God's way because He succeeds where we fail.

If you are going to battle the enemy or try to convert your friends or family, begin with prayer. You have to know what God wants you to do. Then you have to obey. Believe with all your heart that God's ways will work. He can do what you and I can't do. In the process, don't be surprised if God doesn't grow your faith. God will empower and strengthen you as you reach out to someone you love or stand up for your faith around the water cooler at work. Our temptation is to defeat evil around us by their methods. It will fail. Follow God instead.

D. Believe God's way will work v.8 *When Joshua had spoken to the people, the seven priests carrying the seven trumpets before the LORD went forward, blowing their trumpets, and the ark of the LORD's covenant followed them.*

Faith does not believe just because of the evidence. It believes because you know God. The people of Israel had been given one demonstration after another, proving that God could be trusted. The recent crossing of the Jordan was proof of God's power and that God's plans work. The people went forward with God's Ark taking the lead. God, Himself, would accompany them into battle and deliver the enemy to them. They followed God as they marched around the city for seven days. The plan was ludicrous, but they believed because God did not disappoint.

God's people still have victories because of Him, not because of our cunning or extraordinary abilities. We will succeed because we follow God by faith. We know His character and how much he wants to reach our family member who doesn't know Him. We know how He can defeat evil. Our faith is not in the plan or our planning. It is in God. He has repeatedly shown us how He can do great things for His church. He has shown that even the most unorthodox methods work if they are what God had told us to do. We know God. We know what He wants. We have faith because of that knowledge.

It is about God's glory and not yours.

Dedicate the mission to God v. 19 *All the silver and gold and the articles of bronze and iron are sacred to the LORD and must go into his treasury."*

They would defeat Jericho, but they must dedicate the mission to God. The city would be burned. The people and animals would be slaughtered. Only the metal objects were to be kept for the Lord. The people of Israel would gain nothing from this victory. They would dedicate Jericho to the Lord as the first fruits of all that was to come next. The people would have homes and vineyards as they took city after city in Palestine but not this one. Giving God the first city was a sign that they trusted He would provide them with the rest of the region as their own.

We must dedicate our ministries to the Lord. If we receive a financial windfall, the Lord gets the first ten percent in recognition that He is the one who brought the victory. If we have a ministry succeed, we make sure that we publically praise the Lord for the success that He has brought. Ministry and witness for us are not for great profit. It is for God's glory. We want the Lord to be known in our community and family. We want them to see the miracles He does and the way He blesses us. We want them to admire God so much that they want to follow Him as well.

Believe so that the world might know how great God is.

It is all about faith. God purposely gave Jericho into the hands of the people in such a way that both the Israelites and the Canaanites knew that God had brought victory. For the Israelites, that brought the faith to conquer the rest of Canaan. For the Canaanites, it struck fear into their hearts. We have to believe that God works those same miracles today and that he works those miracles among us. God still wants to bring people to faith as He did for Rahab. God still battles Satan and his evil daily, so Satan's ways do not overcome the world.

We have to believe that God will give us the words to share when we witness to a friend. We must believe that God has been working on the heart of someone we know, preparing them for your witness. Only then will you have the courage to share and to let others know God's greatness. March forward with God leading the way. The world may look ominous, but our God will conquer it city by city if His people believe. Then the world will know how great our God is and that He wants them to be His people and be part of His family. Faith will conquer the world, for faith follows the Lord.

6. Disobedience brings defeat

Joshua 7: 1-26

Big idea: One sin can have incredible effects on others

Joshua 7:1-26 (NIV)

¹ But the Israelites acted unfaithfully in regard to the devoted things; Achan son of Carmi, the son of Zimri, the son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, took some of them. So the LORD's anger burned against Israel. ² Now Joshua sent men from Jericho to Ai, which is near Beth Aven to the east of Bethel, and told them, "Go up and spy out the region." So the men went up and spied out Ai. ³ When they returned to Joshua, they said, "Not all the people will have to go up against Ai. Send two or three thousand men to take it and do not weary all the people, for only a few men are there." ⁴ So about three thousand men went up; but they were routed by the men of Ai, ⁵ who killed about thirty-six of them. They chased the Israelites from the city gate as far as the stone quarries and struck them down on the slopes. At this the hearts of the people melted and became like water. ⁶ Then Joshua tore his clothes and fell facedown to the ground before the ark of the LORD, remaining there till evening. The elders of Israel did the same, and sprinkled dust on their heads. ⁷ And Joshua said, "Ah, Sovereign LORD, why did you ever bring this people across the Jordan to deliver us into the hands of the Amorites to destroy us? If only we had been content to stay on the other side of the Jordan!" ⁸ O Lord, what can I say, now that Israel has been routed by its enemies? ⁹ The Canaanites and the other people of the country will hear about this and they will surround us and wipe out our name from the earth. What then will you do for your own great name?" ¹⁰ The LORD said to Joshua, "Stand up! What are you doing down on your face? ¹¹ Israel has sinned; they have violated my covenant, which I commanded them to keep. They have taken some of the devoted things; they have stolen, they have lied, they have put them with their own possessions. ¹² That is why the Israelites cannot stand against their enemies; they turn their backs and run because they have been made liable to destruction. I will not be with you anymore unless you destroy whatever among you is devoted to destruction. ¹³ "Go, consecrate the people. Tell them, 'Consecrate yourselves in preparation for tomorrow; for this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: That which is devoted is among you, O Israel. You cannot stand against your enemies until you remove it. ¹⁴ "In the morning, present yourselves tribe by tribe. The tribe that the LORD takes shall come forward clan by clan; the clan that the LORD takes shall come forward family by family; and the family that the LORD takes shall come forward man by man. ¹⁵ He who is caught with the devoted things shall be destroyed by fire, along with all that belongs to him. He has violated the covenant of the LORD and has done a disgraceful thing in Israel!" ¹⁶ Early the next morning Joshua had Israel come forward by tribes, and Judah was taken. ¹⁷ The clans of Judah came forward, and he took the Zerahites. He had the clan of the Zerahites come forward by families, and Zimri was taken. ¹⁸ Joshua had his family come forward man by man, and Achan son of Carmi, the son of Zimri, the son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, was taken. ¹⁹ Then Joshua said to Achan, "My son, give glory to the LORD, the God of Israel, and give him the praise. Tell me what you have done; do not hide it from me." ²⁰ Achan replied, "It is true! I have sinned against the LORD, the God of Israel. This is what I have done: ²¹ When I saw in the plunder a beautiful robe from Babylonia, two hundred shekels of silver and a wedge of gold weighing fifty shekels, I coveted them and took them. They are hidden in the ground inside my tent, with the silver underneath." ²² So Joshua sent messengers, and they ran to the tent, and there it was, hidden in his tent, with the silver underneath. ²³ They took the things from the tent, brought them to Joshua and all the Israelites and spread them out before the LORD. ²⁴ Then Joshua, together with all Israel, took Achan son of Zerah, the silver, the robe, the gold wedge, his sons and daughters, his cattle, donkeys and sheep, his tent and all that he had, to the Valley of Achor. ²⁵ Joshua said, "Why have you brought this trouble on us? The LORD will bring trouble on you today." Then all Israel stoned him, and after they had stoned the rest, they burned them. ²⁶ Over Achan they heaped up a large pile of rocks, which remains to this day. Then the LORD turned from his fierce anger. Therefore that place has been called the Valley of Achor ever since.

Is one sin really that big a deal? V. 1 *But the Israelites acted unfaithfully in regard to the devoted things; Achan son of Carmi, the son of Zimri, the son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, took some of them.*

It wasn't that big a deal. A politician lied to the nation to cover up what he had done. A woman had an affair a couple of times with her boss. A couple of kids stole from Walgreens on their way home from school. Nobody got hurt. It wasn't like someone got killed or something, right? We tend to want to be gracious to people and forgive what they did. We want to avoid trying to figure out who sinned and sort out the effects of sin on the people around them. Unfortunately, sin is messy, and we forget all the people one sin can harm.

God is gracious and forgiving, but he doesn't like excuses. He sees the damage that sin can do. The Lord saw how Abraham's lies almost cost him his wife. He cried over the death of 70,000 people when David took a census. Their sins did impact the people around them very intensely. After the people of Israel defeated Jericho, they had to deal with a sin that conquered them. I am sure that Achan thought that the gold and silver would never be missed. No one was being hurt. Instead, his lies to himself caused the nation, the leaders, and his family more pain than he would ever have guessed.

Sin affects those around us.

A. Sin affects the community v. 4-5 *they were routed by the men of Ai, who killed about thirty-six of them. . . . At this, the hearts of the people melted and became like water.*

Thirty-six people died in battle because the Lord was not with Israel. They had defeated the greater town of Jericho, and the bible doesn't mention that they lost a single person. The nation had its first and only defeat in Canaan because Achan sinned and stole the gold and silver that belonged to the Lord. His sin was typical of the attitude of the people. The spies came back confident that they could defeat the little town. There was no mention of God's victory at Jericho or God's ability to conquer this small city. Like Achan, the people were not thinking of God. They were thinking of themselves.

A community suffers when one person sins. I think of a shooter in a Colorado High School who impacted the entire community with his violence. I think of a nation affected when a politician fabricates lies against an opponent or makes deals under the table. The evening news shows how we have become immune to a shooting in the big city or politicians who are crooked. It has become no big deal. Sin has become commonplace and has changed our attitudes so that we are saturated with evil. It has become easy to ignore it.

B. Sin affects the leaders v. 6 *Then Joshua tore his clothes and fell facedown to the ground before the ark of the LORD, remaining there till evening.*

Joshua breaks down. Israel had seemed invincible after the Jordan River crossing and the defeat of Jericho. God had gone before them and brought victory. Would they now be defeated and not have other conquests? He took the loss of the 36 men and the departure of God personally. The attitude of the nation affected Joshua as well. There was such joy over their abilities that the army did not take the ark or ask God for victory. They went into battle without God expecting to win by themselves. The nation had not yet learned that they had to depend on God.

Sin affects the nation. America was divided over Nixon's Watergate and Clinton's sexual intrigue. Instead of governing, a nation's leaders can't get along and smear each other. People cheer on the defeat of the opposite party, and the country goes into a tailspin. Good people avoid public office, and the nation doesn't trust them. We want term limits and want investigations into every possible breach of trust. Like the Roman empire of long ago, such intrigue can bring down a nation and its leaders, no matter how good or bad they are.

C. Sin affects our trust in God v.7. *And Joshua said, "Ah, Sovereign LORD, why did you ever bring this people across the Jordan to deliver us into the hands of the Amorites to destroy us?"*

Sin caused the whole community to doubt God. Joshua's words sound just like the unbelieving Israelites in the desert. He felt that God had failed them and should have left them in Egypt rather than die in Palestine at the hands of the Canaanites. Sin had caused Joshua and the people to think that God had failed them when they had failed God. The good thing is that we see Joshua wrestling with God in prayer. He is trying to understand what happened and why things have changed. Faith was there, but it was more fragile.

Sin has caused America to lose its faith in God. We constantly find even Christians doubting God's clear commands. We see the community questioning whether being a Christian is a good thing and looking for other places to answer their needs and concerns. Sin separates us from God as couples live together or people see cheating and lies as the way to get what they want. Sin separates us from God and makes us want to recast God in our image instead of believing that what He says is right. One sin changes attitudes and hurts our faith in God.

D. Sin affects our family v. 25 *Joshua said, "Why have you brought this trouble on us? The LORD will bring trouble on you today." Then all Israel stoned him, and after they had stoned the rest, they burned them.*

Achan's sin probably cost his family everything. They may have been guilty of helping Achan hide the silver and gold. They were likely participants in the crime and would face death just like Achan did. His family and all his possessions would be lost because He lusted for the gold and his theft. Many want to soften the text and say that Achan's family was spared. If they were, they had no property, no animals for food, and no tent in which to live. Even then, the cost of their father's sin would have been high. He took from God and paid the consequences.

Sin affects the family. Look at how a family is torn apart, and the children suffer when the Father commits adultery. See how a thief thrown in prison for five or ten years impacts his children and their education. Watch how lies or greed split families for years, so they don't speak to each other. No matter what you do, you can't soften the consequences of sin on the family. The effects come even if the person is not punished. Our sin does affect our family for years, perhaps even all their lives. It leaves a string of broken children and broken lives.

Sin must be seen as a sin.

We must remove sin so it can't continue to destroy v. 13 *Go, consecrate the people. Tell them, 'Consecrate yourselves in preparation for tomorrow; for this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: That which is devoted is among you, O Israel. You cannot stand against your enemies until you remove it.*

When sin is exposed, it must be dealt with. God uses lots to claim the tribe of Judah, then the clan of Zerah, and finally, a man named Achan. One wonders how Achan felt as his tribe and then his clan was chosen. What he thought was hidden could not be hidden from God. Without removing the sinner, the nation could not stand up to its enemies. They would lose battle after battle and have more people killed. The sinful one had to be separated and dealt with. His sin could not be allowed to fester and destroy the rest of the body of believers.

Every sin has consequences. Those who remain in their sin will continue to affect their community, their family, and themselves for years. It is only by throwing ourselves on the mercy of God and asking for forgiveness that we halt the effects of sin and allow God to help us restore our lives. Sin can't be hidden from God. He will punish some who refuse to repent and let natural consequences play out in the lives of others. Evil will not be allowed to succeed. It will be removed so that it can't continue to destroy those around us. Confession and forgiveness are the only answer.

Those who treat sin lightly are destined to repeat it v. 26 *Over Achan they heaped up a large pile of rocks, which remains to this day. Then the LORD turned from his fierce anger. Therefore that place has been called the Valley of Achor ever since.*

Here is the third memorial in the book of Joshua. After the conquering of Jericho, the people had become lax in their relationship with the Lord. They had become proud of what they had done and had not paid close attention to God's commands. Before them was a memorial reminding them of sin's effects. Only when Israel and God's people honor and obey God will they have success. It was a reminder that you can't fool God. The stones were a reminder of the effect that one sin can have on a nation and a family. Achor means trouble, and that is a reminder of the trouble that Achan caused to all.

History is a crucial subject for us all. Those who forget history are destined to repeat it. We can learn a lot from the lives of those who fail. They show us the path to destruction so we can avoid it. Those who were humble and obeyed God showed us the way to God's blessing. There are lots of memorials that show us the same thing. They remind us how one sin can destroy so many. Let us take sin seriously. In our own lives, let us confess it early and receive God's forgiveness. Let's call sin for what it is rather than excuse it or take it lightly.

Interlude: Two parables

These two parables are an interlude for the summer between the messages on Joshua and those on Elijah and Elisha. They both speak of the power of God's love and the importance of using that love in our lives. The first sermon talks about the power of forgiveness. It changes our lives by forgiving what we can never repay. As we have been forgiven, we are to go and forgive others. The second sermon speaks of the power of belonging. God called us to be His people, and we should care about others who wander off. Busy lives and distractions take people away from the kingdom. God's people need to miss them and do whatever they can to bring them back into the fold. In both parables, we see how important we are to God and others are to Him as well. We are to care about others because God cared about us.

1. The transformation of forgiveness

Matt.18:21-35

Big idea: Forgiveness has the power to transform lives.

Matthew 18:21-35 (NIV)

²¹ Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?" ²² Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times. ²³ "Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. ²⁴ As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. ²⁵ Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. ²⁶ "The servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' ²⁷ The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go. ²⁸ "But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded. ²⁹ "His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.' ³⁰ "But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. ³¹ When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened. ³² "Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. ³³ Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' ³⁴ In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. ³⁵ "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."

A Lesson on Generosity and Forgiveness

It had been a tough ten months since Bob's wife had been diagnosed with breast cancer. Now, after chemo, the doctor had labeled her cancer free, but the bills from the hospital and doctor's office left Bob feeling dead. Insurance had paid their part, and now Bob had a statement for over \$500K that was his part. The hospital would take his house and garnish 20 % of his wages until the bill was paid. He figured that he and Connie would be paying it all the rest of their lives. George, his friend, started a "go fund me" account and publicized Bob and Connie's plight. In the first week, 50K came in.

The money allowed Bob to negotiate with the hospital and save his house. Other donations came when the local television station picked up on the story. Within three months, the debt was paid. Bob and Connie began speaking in the community and giving back to others. They were changed people. Peter asks a question about forgiveness between Christians. I want to ask how forgiveness from God has changed you. Are you like Bob and Connie, whose lives have been transformed, or Peter, who still doesn't get the power of forgiveness?

A. forgiveness begins with humility v. 26 *"The servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.'*

There is a good chance that the man stole from the king. The total debt would be in the millions of our dollars. What is laughable is that the man promises that he can pay it back. He was sorry that he got caught but not sorry for the debt. There is no genuine repentance here, just fear. And the fear was genuine. His life was over. His possessions would be gone, and the king would sell him and his family into slavery. Then the master did something extraordinary. He forgave the servant of the debt. It was gone, and his life would return to him.

Forgiveness for us always begins at the cross. We stand there on our knees, realizing that we cannot repay God for the sins that we have committed. How do you undo a lie or take away something you have done in anger? You can't. It is as big as a million dollar debt and impossible to pay off. Then Jesus says from the cross. "Father, forgive them" and takes our sins on him. The sin is forgiven. The debt is paid. We live in thanks to our God for his mercy and his forgiveness. If we are like Bob and Connie in the story, we are changed forever, and we know we can keep coming to the cross for forgiveness all our life.

B. Forgiveness is meant to be shared v. 30 *"But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt.*

The servant didn't get it. He was bound and determined to get the money to pay back the king. He found someone who owed him 100 days' worth of wages, which is about \$10K in our money, and demanded payment. It was small compared to what he owed, but the king might take it as a down payment. The other servants saw what was happening and went to the king. They were concerned about the second servant. They were upset that the first servant disregarded the king's mercy and took it for granted. It wasn't fair. They wanted justice and wanted the same compassion for all.

There are a lot of people in our community and even church who don't feel forgiven. They see the size of their sins and think that the cross has done little. Sometimes, they have pride and tell God they don't need his forgiveness and live as they have before. Those who are genuinely forgiven know they have a debt they can never repay. They don't feel guilty, for they know that Jesus has freely given the gift, but they do feel compelled to pass it on. They want others to feel as good about being forgiven as they do. They want others to have changed lives.

C. A lack of forgiveness enslaves us v. 34 *In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured until he should pay back all he owed*

The forgiven servant is thrown into prison. He ignored the king's kindness and did not understand the power of forgiveness. He wanted justice and a chance to pay off all he owed because he was too good for the gift. The king gave him what he wanted. The forgiveness of the king was complete and free. Yet, the servant's actions brought consequences. In his way, he refused the forgiveness of the king. He didn't understand that he was forgiven, so he could not forgive others.

The world's worst prison is an unforgiving heart. If we refuse to forgive and let the hurts that others bring into our lives, we imprison others and cause ourselves great torment. We will seek to bring justice to others and be caught in the pain of our actions. Forgiveness may often come with conditions as it did for the king. You may find someone who abuses your forgiveness or who continues to hurt you. Don't let them pull you down as this servant wanted to do to the king. Release the hurt they caused you and let them face the consequences of their actions, just as the king did.

Forgive freely and be free v. 22 *Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.*

Peter didn't understand the meaning of forgiveness. He asked about his need to forgive others but never considered the possibility that others would need to forgive him. Only Jesus is perfect. As we think about forgiving others, we must realize that people will need to forgive us too. That is why we need to keep forgiving. Seventy-seven times is more than we can count; that is Jesus' point. We need to be in the

habit of forgiving because we know that we need forgiveness from others just as many times. I may need to forgive you, but someone else may need to forgive me.

That is why Jesus wants us to see that forgiveness is about love. God's love for us has no limits. I come daily to my God, asking Him to forgive me for the sins I have committed in the last 24 hours. I can do that because I know He loves me and will keep forgiving me. I need to forgive others as freely as God has forgiven me so that I am not trapped in anger or revenge. Yes, there are people I need to be wary of, but I can't let anger or hatred of them control my life. I need to live in God's forgiveness and let the Lord deal with them rather than plot their demise.

How has forgiveness changed you?

How has forgiveness changed you? Do you understand the size of the forgiveness you have received from God? Most Christians don't. We think we can repay God for what He has done, given time. Some even feel that their service to God and church is that repayment. Yet, those who truly understand the size of their sins and the mercy of God will treat others differently. They know they can never repay God and that God is OK with that. Therefore, they will come to God daily for mercy rather than racking up a debt of guilt or a fear of God.

When they see other sinners, they want them to have the joy God has given them. They forgive because they know how good it is to be forgiven. They forgive because they know the pleasure of being free from anger or the need for revenge. Forgiveness has changed them. And what do they do with the unforgiving people? They give them to God just as the other servants gave the unforgiving servant to the king. They will be forgiving and let go trusting that the Lord will bring justice. We are called to be compassionate and leave justice to God.

2. Seeking the Lost

Luke 15: 4-10

We hurt when part of the family is missing.

Luke 15:4-10 (NIV)

⁴ "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? ⁵ And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders ⁶ and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.' ⁷ I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent. ⁸ "Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Does she not light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? ⁹ And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.' ¹⁰ In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

Lost, Found, and Rejoice

It was 70 degrees on a sunny day in June at the Cincinnati zoo, and the Lambert family had come with all six of their children for a day together. They had just eaten lunch at the picnic area at the zoo's north end when mother Lambert suddenly noticed that Bobbie was missing. So mom, Dad, and the oldest son, Tom, fanned out while the oldest daughter Jean watched the other children at the picnic area. Finally, after ten anxious minutes, Dad found Bobbie back at the polar bear exhibit watching the bear swim and play with a red ball.

After a few words of warning, they returned to the picnic area. Suddenly the mood went from panic to joy. The lost had been found. The broken family was now whole. The rest of the day, Bobbie was allowed to be no more than six feet from Mom or Dad. The church is a family, and we should all be hurting when one of the family members is out of place. These two stories of Jesus remind us of what is at stake when someone in the family is not here. They remind us of the pain when they are not here and the joy that we have on their return.

A. When people lose their way v. 4a *"Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them.*

These two parables help us understand what it means to be lost. First, the sheep was lost because of its foolishness. Sheep tend to go astray. They ignore what is happening around them and can follow a line of grass away from the rest of the flock. The coin was part of the woman's dowry and was lost because of her carelessness. Instead of guarding it, she became cavalier with it, and soon it was gone. Imagine what it was like to lose a tenth of your savings in one moment. Both the sheep and the coin were out of place and useless to their owners.

Some of us never know the feeling of being spiritually lost. It often isn't something you plan. You may even feel fine at first, and then it hits you. Trouble comes, and like a sheep facing wolves, you have lost all your support network. You may not know where to turn or how to get help. You are alone. The lost are all around us but don't call them lost because many of them think that those who follow Jesus are lost and that they are just fine. It may only be when life falls apart that they realize that life is missing something without Jesus. Some will never figure that out. Regardless, they are no use to the Lord in this state, and many are no use to themselves or others.

B. When we care enough to go and find them v. 4b *Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it?*

By leaving the ninety-nine sheep to go after the one, the shepherd is saying that this one sheep is significant. Likewise, the woman stops what she is doing to clean the house and searches every dark corner till she finds the coin. The sheep and the coin have value to them. When we keep contacting a person who leaves the church, we are saying that they have value to us. Especially if they leave a local church and don't find another one, we continue to make an effort to connect with them and let them know that they are important to God and us.

That can be a challenging and thankless job, I know. Those missing from church may even tire of hearing from you or getting cards and letters from you. Just remember that it is an act of love. It continues to be your way of saying that I care about you and want you to have the joy I once saw in your life. You and I want them back in the family. We want them to have the salvation of heaven, but even more, we want them to have a God they can pray to when times get tough and friends they can depend on to rally around them. It is often tricky, but you do it because you care and value this person.

C. When the family is whole again v. 6 *Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.'*

Picture the joy of the shepherd and the woman who found her coin. The joy is made real in that the shepherd often never finds the sheep or finds it torn to pieces by a wolf. The woman knows that she may never discover the coin if it's buried in the dirt floor or hidden in a bit of trash to be thrown out. In both cases, it is a time of public celebration for the loss of a sheep or her coin affects more than this one person. It is so valuable that everyone has been hoping the woman found her coin or that a sheep is returned unharmed. Both are useable again, and catastrophe has been averted.

You have the same feeling when someone who has been missing is back in church or returns to the men's group or the LWML. While they were gone, it was like an arm was detached from the church. You wondered if you would ever see that part of the family again. It is a time of celebration for us, and their return improves our lives. You hover around them, wanting to catch up on what has happened to them. You want to celebrate as a church without embarrassing them because the church was less without them. The family is whole again, and it gives us all a boost.

It is not about being lost; it is about being valued.

Valuing others and being valued

It is all about value. People don't realize how much it impacts the rest of us when someone is gone. Life gets busy, and we miss a Sunday, and then it gets a little busier, and soon the Sunday has become three, four, or six Sundays. Each person is valuable, and there are holes when people are gone. And when we are missing someone, we need to do something about it. We need to let them know we value them. We can't just wait for the pastor to call or drop in for a visit. Every one of us is less when someone is gone. We hope they are less because we are not in their lives either.

It is about value. We are busy, but we need to take the time to pick up the phone or email the person. We are worried and afraid that they will be upset or think we are hounding them. So okay, don't mention that they have been gone from the church. Let them know you are less without them. Ask them how life is going. Tell them what has been happening in your life. If the church is truly a family, then we need each other. If you are going to be gone on a trip, let others know so they don't worry because they have value to you. Value others and be someone who realizes your importance.

You are a sheep and a shepherd.

We don't get how we impact people when we are gone. Pretend you are a sheep. Now imagine how you affect the shepherd who is worried sick about you. Think of Mother Lambert frantically searching for her son. God and all of us miss you, and your absence affects us. Now picture yourself as the shepherd. How do you feel when someone is missing? Imagine frantically checking and worried you would find that

sheep torn to pieces by some wolf. Get that same image when you think of someone else missing from church when you don't know why they are gone.

Picture yourself calling them, writing them, and letting them know they are loved. Picture yourself wondering what has happened. Did they have surgery or some other tragedy? You are worried sick, and you lose sleep. Now picture God in heaven, the great shepherd of the sheep. He, too, is scared when people get busy. He knows what can happen when they get away from the flock. He will work to try and bring them back. Each Christian is valuable. We need to see that about ourselves and show that others have value for us. Amen.

Elijah and Elisha: Two men of God

Elijah's commitment to God shocks and challenges us. He was sent to warn and not to comfort a king who often rejected the message of the Lord. His life is filled with highs and lows. He defeated the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel but then ran away when Queen Jezebel threatened him. He struggled with his feelings and often paid a high price for his witness on behalf of the Lord. The great accomplishment in his life was his deep relationship with the Lord. Few successors were as effective as Elisha. He remained with Elijah until the last moments of the teacher's life and duplicated many of the great miracles of his predecessor. He is a caring individual and does twice as many recorded miracles as Elijah in the Bible. Many of these miracles put people in touch with the heart of God. As we look at these two men, we will see men of faith who served in difficult times.

1 Widow at Zarephath

1 Kings 17:7-24

Big idea: The Lord is more concerned with the worker than the work.

1 Kings 17:7-24 (NIV)

⁷ Some time later the brook dried up because there had been no rain in the land. ⁸ Then the word of the LORD came to him: ⁹ "Go at once to Zarephath of Sidon and stay there. I have commanded a widow in that place to supply you with food." ¹⁰ So he went to Zarephath. When he came to the town gate, a widow was there gathering sticks. He called to her and asked, "Would you bring me a little water in a jar so I may have a drink?" ¹¹ As she was going to get it, he called, "And bring me, please, a piece of bread." ¹² "As surely as the LORD your God lives," she replied, "I don't have any bread--only a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a jug. I am gathering a few sticks to take home and make a meal for myself and my son, that we may eat it--and die." ¹³ Elijah said to her, "Don't be afraid. Go home and do as you have said. But first make a small cake of bread for me from what you have and bring it to me, and then make something for yourself and your son." ¹⁴ For this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: "The jar of flour will not be used up and the jug of oil will not run dry until the day the LORD gives rain on the land." ¹⁵ She went away and did as Elijah had told her. So there was food every day for Elijah and for the woman and her family. ¹⁶ For the jar of flour was not used up and the jug of oil did not run dry, in keeping with the word of the LORD spoken by Elijah. ¹⁷ Some time later the son of the woman who owned the house became ill. He grew worse and worse, and finally stopped breathing. ¹⁸ She said to Elijah, "What do you have against me, man of God? Did you come to remind me of my sin and kill my son?" ¹⁹ "Give me your son," Elijah replied. He took him from her arms, carried him to the upper room where he was staying, and laid him on his bed. ²⁰ Then he cried out to the LORD, "O LORD my God, have you brought tragedy also upon this widow I am staying with, by causing her son to die?" ²¹ Then he stretched himself out on the boy three times and cried to the LORD, "O LORD my God, let this boy's life return to him!" ²² The LORD heard Elijah's cry, and the boy's life returned to him, and he lived. ²³ Elijah picked up the child and carried him down from the room into the house. He gave him to his mother and said, "Look, your son is alive!" ²⁴ Then the woman said to Elijah, "Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the LORD from your mouth is the truth."

How does God build a servant?

One might expect God to always do something dramatic whenever He wants to call His servants. He did so when He called Moses from a burning bush or Saul from a cloud in the sky. Elijah would have moments like that when he called down fire on Mt. Carmel, but we see something very different here. Having told wicked King Ahab that there would be years of famine, Elijah must now wait while the enemy hunts to kill him or force him to undo the curse of the famine. He begins at a brook with unclean ravens feeding him, but soon the stream dries up so that the prophet must learn to trust the Lord.

One expects that ministry will always have fantastic and powerful moments where people come to faith by the dozens and grow in the Lord's power. Instead, we often wait for years for that kind of success. We do so by a dying brook where money is scarce and hardship is plentiful. Those times are valuable as the Lord uses them to build and teach us so that we are ready when the powerful times come. Elijah will

learn over the three years of waiting, but as we will see later, he was not fully prepared for the result of the fires on Carmel when God calls him to wait again.

Learning to trust God

A. Going where He calls us v. 9 *"Go at once to Zarephath of Sidon and stay there. I have commanded a widow in that place to supply you with food."*

The first thing we must learn is to go where He calls us. The call must have shocked the prophet. He was going into the enemy territory, the home of the evil Queen Jezebel, and would have to rely on a poor widow. Food wouldn't be plentiful there, and a widow would have even less. God was putting him where the wicked king and queen would never think to look for him. God was teaching Elijah to trust the Lord to provide and protect him. The call made no sense, and it would have been easy for the prophet to have doubted God's wisdom.

Sometimes we think we can tell the Lord what we should do in His name. We want to pick the place and the results and expect the Lord to give them to us because it will surely bring results. God seldom works that way. He wants us dependent on Him. He wants us to obey, not command. We think ministry is about results and bringing glory to the Lord. God often thinks about people and helps them grow. We want things quickly, but God is patient and helps us slowly learn and build the character we need to serve Him. He wants us to learn to trust His promises in life.

B. Learning to ask the impossible because you believe v. 11-12 *And bring me, please, a piece of bread." "As surely as the LORD your God lives," she replied, "I don't have any bread--only a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a jug.*

She was hardly a person who could help someone else, but the Lord had told Elijah that a widow would provide. Elijah asked the impossible from the widow because he trusted what God had told him. The widow only had resources that could provide one meal. Here was a man who needed to reside with her and be fed for months. Faith saw that God could do the impossible even through this woman. How nice it would have been to find a wealthy widow with a well-filled pantry. Instead, God gave him a woman ready to die of starvation. Each day's bread would be as much a miracle to her as the manna that came to the Jews in the desert.

Because we tend to look at our resources instead of considering what the Lord can do, God often makes us look to Him for our daily bread. But do we believe in His mercy and help in this day of filled pantries and 401K accounts? Do we expect to do more than humanly possible? Most of the great servants in scripture have moments when they must depend on God to provide. It is God's way of teaching us, again and again, to trust Him so that He can do miracles in our ministries and our lives. God is building character when we are anxious for results.

C. Partnering with others v.13 *Elijah said to her, "Don't be afraid. Go home and do as you have said. But first make a small cake of bread for me from what you have and bring it to me,*

She would hardly have been the mission partner you would have thought to choose for yourself. She had few resources, was not a believer, and lived in the wicked queen's land. Yet, God saw beyond all that and told Elijah to put his life in her hands. To his surprise, she was precisely the person that he probably needed. It is incredible that the woman agrees to feed Elijah first and believes in his promise of a never-ending food supply. She is also the perfect place to hide from Jezebel, who would never look for the prophet in her own backyard. Elijah would live with her for two years, and God would provide for them both as they learned to trust the Lord.

People can surprise us because we look at the outside when God looks at the heart. Often, trusting God means trusting people around us who may not do things as we would or who don't seem as gifted as we wish. What they do have is that they are willing to obey the Lord and trust Him. God gives us partners and teaches us to work with them. It was never God's intention for a Christian to work alone. He wants to

mold and help us by letting our work with others expand and allow us to see things in new ways. Elijah would have a group of helpers. So must we. It is part of our growth as God's children.

D. Calling for miracles in crisis v. 20 *Then he cried out to the LORD, "O LORD my God, have you brought tragedy also upon this widow I am staying with, by causing her son to die?"*

After years of preparation, Elijah is put to the test. The happy days with the widow come to an abrupt end as her son dies. This death is a double blow for the widow. She has lost one she loves and the child who would take care of her in her old age. Hope is gone. Notice that Elijah doesn't panic. He simply takes the boy to his room on the roof and begins to pray. The prophet knew that God had led him to this widow, and he expected God to deal with the tragedy. Elijah believes that God can do the miracle and that the Lord will listen to the pain of the prophet and the widow.

God wants to prepare us so that we are ready for the tragedies of life. He wants us to have quiet times of learning from Him and growing in our faith so that we are prepared when life is hard on us or those we love. He knows when troubles will come and what form they will take. Like Elijah, those who have learned from the Lord don't panic. They pray. They pray, trusting God's power and His amazing kindness and mercy for His people. They have confidence that the Lord will help them, and they will live in His grace.

As a servant grows, they take others with him v. 24 *Then the woman said to Elijah, "Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the LORD from your mouth is the truth."*

The result of being with the man of God was that the woman became a believer. She learned about the true God from talking with and watching the life of Elijah. She saw how God kept His promises and helped His people during a crisis. It was a slow process, but she had come to know God. Baal, the god of her fathers, was a dead god who did little to help his people in a famine or raise the dead back to life. Yahweh was the true God who could both give and sustain life. As Elijah lived his faith, the woman got to see and touch God in a way that few in her nation ever had.

The mature Christian will touch others around him. They will bring blessings to their family as children and others watch their lives and hear what they say. They will bring benefits to friends and coworkers who will learn from them what godly character and hope are. They will be there for friends in their crisis to pray and to let God work miracles through them. People will come to know God through them. The unseen God will become visible even in places where God is not usually welcome. You take people with you as you grow, and in the process, they see God.

It is often in the quiet moments that we learn the most from the Lord

At the start of this text, Elijah hadn't been in ministry for a long time, but God would use his private ministry with the woman and her son to prepare him for the enormous things to come. The three years of exile were a time to learn about God, himself, and those who didn't have God. He had to learn to trust the Lord to provide food for him and life for a person he loved. You could have wondered why he wasn't doing ministry in Israel, but God had a better plan. He was preparing His servant. Elijah was where God wanted him to be. He was in a quiet place where he could learn.

In our go-go world, we are taught to make the most of every moment and to move upward toward our goals constantly. We often prefer the hustle and bustle to the quiet times. We want to get things done and don't think about what the Lord can do in those quiet times for us. I have found that the Lord is often just as concerned with the worker as the work. Redeeming and building people is what is important to Him. Letting us touch others so that they are built up in those quiet times is a bonus for God. He is preparing us for great things, and that is important to Him.

2 Elijah: The showdown for their hearts

1 Kings 18:16-39

Big idea: If you know God, you must choose to follow God alone.

1 Kings 18:16-39 (NIV)

¹⁶ So Obadiah went to meet Ahab and told him, and Ahab went to meet Elijah. ¹⁷ When he saw Elijah, he said to him, "Is that you, you troubler of Israel?" ¹⁸ "I have not made trouble for Israel," Elijah replied. "But you and your father's family have. You have abandoned the LORD's commands and have followed the Baals." ¹⁹ Now summon the people from all over Israel to meet me on Mount Carmel. And bring the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal and the four hundred prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel's table." ²⁰ So Ahab sent word throughout all Israel and assembled the prophets on Mount Carmel. ²¹ Elijah went before the people and said, "How long will you waver between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him." But the people said nothing. ²² Then Elijah said to them, "I am the only one of the LORD's prophets left, but Baal has four hundred and fifty prophets. ²³ Get two bulls for us. Let them choose one for themselves, and let them cut it into pieces and put it on the wood but not set fire to it. I will prepare the other bull and put it on the wood but not set fire to it. ²⁴ Then you call on the name of your god, and I will call on the name of the LORD. The god who answers by fire--he is God." Then all the people said, "What you say is good." ²⁵ Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, "Choose one of the bulls and prepare it first, since there are so many of you. Call on the name of your god, but do not light the fire." ²⁶ So they took the bull given them and prepared it. Then they called on the name of Baal from morning till noon. "O Baal, answer us!" they shouted. But there was no response; no one answered. And they danced around the altar they had made. ²⁷ At noon Elijah began to taunt them. "Shout louder!" he said. "Surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or traveling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened." ²⁸ So they shouted louder and slashed themselves with swords and spears, as was their custom, until their blood flowed. ²⁹ Midday passed, and they continued their frantic prophesying until the time for the evening sacrifice. But there was no response, no one answered, no one paid attention. ³⁰ Then Elijah said to all the people, "Come here to me." They came to him, and he repaired the altar of the LORD, which was in ruins. ³¹ Elijah took twelve stones, one for each of the tribes descended from Jacob, to whom the word of the LORD had come, saying, "Your name shall be Israel." ³² With the stones he built an altar in the name of the LORD, and he dug a trench around it large enough to hold two seahs of seed. ³³ He arranged the wood, cut the bull into pieces and laid it on the wood. Then he said to them, "Fill four large jars with water and pour it on the offering and on the wood." ³⁴ "Do it again," he said, and they did it again. "Do it a third time," he ordered, and they did it the third time. ³⁵ The water ran down around the altar and even filled the trench. ³⁶ At the time of sacrifice, the prophet Elijah stepped forward and prayed: "O LORD, God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command. ³⁷ Answer me, O LORD, answer me, so these people will know that you, O LORD, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again." ³⁸ Then the fire of the LORD fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones and the soil, and also licked up the water in the trench. ³⁹ When all the people saw this, they fell prostrate and cried, "The LORD--he is God! The LORD--he is God!"

Sitting on the fence can be painful.

We often talk about someone sitting on the fence, but that is precarious at best and painful at worst. Even a flat fence top is something that you can easily fall off and hurt yourself. On the other hand, a picket fence or a barbed wire fence is more dangerous and sounds painful. Either way, it is a careful balancing act that is hard to manage for long. About 50 years before this time, Jeroboam had split the northern kingdoms from Judah and created false gods for the people to worship so they didn't have to worship in Jerusalem, where they might abandon the Northern Kingdom. Older adults still remember the time when people worshipped the true God in Jerusalem. Now they were living a lie.

They thought that they could worship both God and Baal. In their minds, one god was like another. Yet, God had shown them with a three-and-a-half-year drought that they could not trust Baal, the god of weather and harvests. So, it was time to make a decision. Who would they worship? America is the land of many gods. Some worship Allah, and others worship money or fame. Many people think that they can worship the true God while putting other things first in their lives. They feel that they can adapt His teachings and values to their ideas. It is time to get off the fence.

Getting people to make a choice

A. Pointing out the obvious with a challenge v. 21 *Elijah went before the people and said, "How long will you waver between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him." But the people said nothing.*

Elijah had proclaimed to King Ahab that God was displeased with his idolatry and evil. Because of that, there would be no rain till God announced through Elijah that rains would come again. You would think starvation would lead the people back to God. But, unfortunately, it didn't, so Elijah made a challenge. Would they acknowledge that God was the true God, or would they continue to cling to a god who could not deliver rain or food for the people? The people said nothing. They were here holding to their godless ways and refusing to make the change. Thus, Elijah makes a challenge. It would be God against Baal.

I won't say that the world's current problems are God's punishment, but I think they should be a wake-up call for all nations. Disease, economic failure, and divisions are present in the majority of the countries of the world. Man clings to the idea that he can handle all these problems. It is time for America and the world to stop putting God second. How long will the people falter between the two opinions? How long will they pay lip service to God but trust the government to fix our health issues and finances? How long will churches tolerate sinful practices and make them acceptable?

B. Sincerity in a false god is not enough v. 26 *So they took the bull given them and prepared it. Then they called on the name of Baal from morning till noon. "O Baal, answer us!" they shouted. But there was no response; no one answered. And they danced around the altar they had made.*

The priests of Baal believed in their God. They cried, whipped themselves up into a frenzy, and even cut themselves as they offered their blood to Baal so he would answer. Yet, all their words, emotions, and sacrifices meant nothing. They were talking to a false god who could do nothing. Baal was not in control of the weather. God was in control. They worshipped one of Satan's minions. His power was limited, and he could not overcome God's command for the rains to stop. Their belief was strong. Their god was weak. They worshipped for hours, and nothing happened.

People think that sincerity is enough. But, if that sincerity is worshipping the wrong God, it will always bring failure. It doesn't matter if people work hard to have significant money and fame or if they trust in the government to solve the world's problems as it tries to push God out of control. An ordinary person with a bit of faith can accomplish more than the most gifted and devoted person who has no use for God can ever do. Following a false god with greater fervor only leads to greater suffering and disasters. Prayers and devotion mean nothing if it is to the wrong god.

C. God shows that He is willing to be their God v. 31 *Elijah took twelve stones, one for each of the tribes descended from Jacob, to whom the word of the LORD had come, saying, "Your name shall be Israel."*

They had been gone from the Lord for over 50 years, but God wanted them to know He still wanted to be their God. Elijah takes twelve stones, one for each tribe, to show that the Lord was the God of all Israel and not just Judah. Elijah rebuilt an altar that had been forgotten to show that God didn't forget them. It was probably an altar from an earlier time when they had worshipped God. It was an altar destroyed by those who had no use for God. God was ready to rebuild and show them why they should return to Him and abandon their false worship.

Churches have been emptying for years as people have seen God as unnecessary. Some talk of coming back to the Lord, but action has yet to follow words. God will do what it takes amid a broken world to show them He has not abandoned them, even if they have forgotten Him. The action of rebuilding the altar is a gospel moment in this text. God always forgives and receives His people. To the person sick in the hospital, the person whose home is destroyed in a tornado, or the person who is financially on the rocks because of job loss, God is always ready and willing to help. He never abandons us.

D. The true God shows His power v. 38 *Then the fire of the LORD fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones and the soil, and also licked up the water in the trench.*

God makes a grand show to a people who had forgotten the power and commitment of the true God. Elijah prays, and the fire falls without delay. Baal had been silent for hours. God couldn't wait a moment to show that He was God and wanted His people. God even exceeded expectations. A simple lightning bolt that set the meat on fire would have been enough. Instead, God sent a fire that consumed the sacrifice, the water, and the altar. The altar of Baal was a monument to their failure. God's altar was consumed as a sign of His total commitment and control.

Healing comes in the hospital. Help comes when you are down to your last dollar in the checkbook. God still exceeds our expectations. When God wants people to believe, He often does the remarkable. Our Lord works miracles so that people see He is still the God they can trust. Even greater is when He draws someone closer to Him so they can know Him in a new and deeper way. They get to touch God's heart and see how much He cares. They get to know the depth of His wisdom so that they follow God and desire His character. God will move heaven and earth to draw people to Him.

The choice is yours

The crowd fears God's power for the moment v. 39 *When all the people saw this, they fell prostrate and cried, "The LORD--he is God! The LORD--he is God!"*

The response was immediate. The people fell to the ground in awe and wonder, confessing the truth about God. They made a decision that the God of Elijah was the true God. They continued that day by killing the prophets of Baal, who had led them astray from the true God. It was a time of revival for the nation, right? Not really. It was a moment that didn't last. The nation of Israel didn't return to the Lord and was destroyed about 75 years later by Assyria. Even this great miracle didn't make the people choose God over Baal. The revival fizzled almost as soon as it began.

God brings healing to a sick person. He gives a new job to someone struggling in life. He even helps nations through a crisis. There is a moment of thankfulness, but far too often, it doesn't last. It doesn't change a life; the person will soon return to their other gods. If life is to change, the revival must be permanent. Worshiping God for the rest of your life has to be a choice. It has to be a desire to let the Lord rebuild you one day at a time as you live in His presence and honor His ways. Half a commitment is seldom any commitment at all and will lead to pain.

The prophet believes by faith v. 36 *At the time of sacrifice, the prophet Elijah stepped forward and prayed: "O LORD, God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel"*

Like Elijah, the true believer must trust in God against the odds. He stood all alone with 450 prophets of Baal and a crowd that was more against him than for him. In the sea of anger and doubt, he believed God would do the impossible. Yet, he succeeded that day because he believed in God with all His heart. God had taught Elijah to trust over the three years of being cared for in the famine. He had made his choice and was willing to die that day if God had failed for without God there was nothing for which to live. His faith in God was life. It was the source of his strength and purpose. God was everything to Him.

If anyone wants to live through the challenges life can bring, they need to make a choice and stop sitting on the fence. Even those who get into heaven by the skin of their teeth with a wishy-washy life will never have the true blessings that come from wholehearted devotion to God. Encourage people to choose as you have. Love the Lord with all your heart, soul, and mind, and leave the world's ways behind. God alone is your strength and your future. He alone can bring us through the present troubles and obtain a bright future for His people. Amen.

3 Burnout in ministry

1 Kings 19:1-18

Big idea: Burnout comes when we forget God and focus on ourselves.

1 Kings 19:1-18 (NIV)

¹ Now Ahab told Jezebel everything Elijah had done and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. ² So Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah to say, "May the gods deal with me, be it ever so severely, if by this time tomorrow I do not make your life like that of one of them." ³ Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there, ⁴ while he himself went a day's journey into the desert. He came to a broom tree, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. "I have had enough, LORD," he said. "Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors." ⁵ Then he lay down under the tree and fell asleep. All at once an angel touched him and said, "Get up and eat." ⁶ He looked around, and there by his head was a cake of bread baked over hot coals, and a jar of water. He ate and drank and then lay down again. ⁷ The angel of the LORD came back a second time and touched him and said, "Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you." ⁸ So he got up and ate and drank. Strengthened by that food, he traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God. ⁹ There he went into a cave and spent the night. And the word of the LORD came to him: "What are you doing here, Elijah?" ¹⁰ He replied, "I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too." ¹¹ The LORD said, "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by." Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. ¹² After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. ¹³ When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave. Then a voice said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" ¹⁴ He replied, "I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too." ¹⁵ The LORD said to him, "Go back the way you came, and go to the Desert of Damascus. When you get there, anoint Hazael king over Aram. ¹⁶ Also, anoint Jehu son of Nimshi king over Israel, and anoint Elisha son of Shaphat from Abel Meholah to succeed you as prophet. ¹⁷ Jehu will put to death any who escape the sword of Hazael, and Elisha will put to death any who escape the sword of Jehu. ¹⁸ Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel--all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and all whose mouths have not kissed him."

Burnout plagues God's servants.

Burnout is all around us. It is the workers who are quitting their jobs in record numbers. It is people just tired of sitting at home, afraid to go out but feeling trapped. Hospital and other essential workers spend overtime because there are so few to serve. Pastors and lay leaders have spent years trying to do ministry and keep their churches open while trying to help people both in-person and online. It is congregations trying to keep the teachings of the Bible in a world that is constantly changing.

As we will see in the text, we often find ourselves tired and overwhelmed after the great triumphs of ministry. Elijah had been part of a great miracle on Mt. Carmel, but in the days afterward lost his faith and trust in the Lord and started to look inward and run in fear. Is there any way past the burnout? Is there anything that the Lord can do for His servants? What are the costs of burnout for the saint and the church at large? Elijah is the Bible's poster child for burnout and the care of the Lord for His people. Let us learn from him so that we can overcome burnout, too.

A man on fire for God burns out.

A. faith fails, and ministry is lost v. 2-3a *So Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah to say, "May the gods deal with me, be it ever so severely if by this time tomorrow I do not make your life like that of one of them." Elijah was afraid and ran for his life.*

A great victory was won at Mt. Carmel and lost in the days afterward. Jezebel sends a threat, and the prophet falls apart. Elijah was popular and powerful. People were ready to follow him and get rid of Baal once and for all. Yet, fear replaced faith, and he ran for his life. Elijah hadn't made a move for three years without God's instructions. Now, he ran without prayer. The prophet gave in to his gut. Drained, he didn't think and played right into Jezebel's hand. He was discredited, and Jezebel could convince everyone that Baal had brought the rain.

Ministry gets tiring. As a pastor, you have a busy Advent or Lent and are wiped out. As a leader, you finish a project like a basement renovation or evangelism project, and you are ready for a break. Then, a new problem or a request from someone for your help comes, and you are just overwhelmed. You are not thinking of the Lord or asking for his help. Instead, you react with your gut because you are tired and spent. You think it is all up to you, and you just can't do it. The momentum is often lost, and all you have accomplished seems wasted. Faith fails, and ministry is lost.

B. Depression and self-pity take over v. 4 *He came to a broom tree, sat down under it, and prayed that he might die. "I have had enough, LORD," he said. "Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors."*

Elijah ran for over a hundred miles south of Judea and beyond. He was depressed and feeling some self-pity. The prophet was sure that the victory on Mt. Carmel would settle things, but he left the battle with only half a triumph. He felt he was a failure. He wondered if the last three years had done any good. God had never asked him to be better than everyone else or to win this great victory for the Lord. He just asked him to follow God's commands and obey them. God would bring the triumph, not Elijah. Instead, faith was lost, and he was ready to give up on everything, even God.

Pastors leave the ministry and find it hard to worship the Lord elsewhere. I have watched lay people step off council or abandon churches because they couldn't handle the strain and felt like a failure. It is the spiral downward that often leaves them destroyed. They are tired and empty. They gave all they had for God's glory and forgot to let the Lord fill them or help them. In the end, so much of what they achieved is lost. Churches spend months figuring out what to do without the pastor or leader who left. As a result, people wander broken without faith.

God restores His servant.

C. God helps us with our physical needs v. 5 *Then he lay down under the tree and fell asleep. All at once an angel touched him and said, "Get up and eat."*

God helps Elijah at the time of his greatest need. First, he allows him to sleep so that the body is rested. The exertion of the battle on Mt. Carmel had left him drained. The long journey had made that worse. God didn't chew Elijah out for leaving his post. He let his body get the rest that he needed. The angel of the Lord, Jesus before His incarnation at Christmas, came and gave him food twice in the text so that Elijah could take the long journey from there to Mt. Sinai. Elijah didn't question the gift; he was smart enough to take what the Lord offered so that he might be ready to get food for his soul.

Some pastors work seven days a week, and it slowly wears them down. Lay people find themselves working full-time jobs and then coming in for meetings, music, cleaning the church, and a host of other activities. They want to serve the Lord, but sometimes they tire themselves out. Soon they resent the work that should be bringing them joy. Ministry suffers because they can't physically do that many hours in a row. God offers us rest and refreshment. He knows that many things will wait so we can take care of ourselves. He wants years of service rather than a quick burst of energy.

D. God renews our spirit v. 12-13 *After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave. Then a voice said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"*

Having refreshed Elijah's body, God set out to renew his spirit. With a simple question, God reminded Elijah that part of his problem was that he had left his post and was trying to tackle difficulties on his own. He had forgotten that God was responsible for victory and not Elijah. The gentle whisper reminded Elijah that fires and earthquakes scare people, but the gentle voice of God speaks to a person's heart and brings them closer to the Lord. God's greatest power comes in our faith relationship with Him and the hope that God alone can bring for the future.

Sometimes, we must be broken before stopping long enough to hear God's gentle voice of love. We must see that extensive programs and elaborate shows don't touch people as much as a simple gospel word. We have to stop long enough to listen and to be given hope. God may give us a chance to vent our frustrations, but He quietly teaches us to trust Him again. We have caused our frustrations by trying to do things with our power. Our prayer is not for something to be over. It should be that God will begin again and give us hope. Renew me and make me whole.

Being burned out doesn't have to be the end.

God enables us to continue our ministry v. 15 *The LORD said to him, "Go back the way you came and go to the Desert of Damascus. When you get there, anoint Hazael king over Aram.*

God had a dozen reasons for leaving the prophet to rot and die in the cave. Instead, he called him to retrace his steps and begin again. The Lord didn't abandon Elijah but gave him a new task. He showed Elijah that there was a future and that He still believed in him. The situation was not hopeless. God's words were a message of hope. It was a chance to begin again. Elijah needed to go back to Israel, and ministry would go forward. God had a bright future for his servant. While Elijah just wanted to die. God wanted him to live and to have joy once again.

Being burnt out doesn't have to be the end. Sometimes we have made a mistake that caused our demise. Other times, things were fine and could have continued if we had not been running on empty. God lifts His servants and shows them hope. He shows them that there is a future. We may think things can never be set right, but God is never at a loss for what to do. He reclaims the downtrodden servant, fills them with his spirit, and is ready to recommission them for a new task. The ministry will go on because it doesn't depend on us. It depends on God.

The ministry never belongs to us alone v. 16 *Also, anoint Jehu son of Nimshi king over Israel, and anoint Elisha son of Shaphat from Abel Meholah to succeed you as prophet.*

It goes on because the plan is always bigger than us. Elijah thought he was alone, but God told him to appoint other servants. By the time Jehu and Elisha are finished, Baal will be almost wiped out of Israel. The Lord gives us ministry partners to take the ministry to the next step. No one servant or generation can do it all. We look at our own two hands while God looks at the big picture spanning centuries of progress. Elijah was to do His part so that others could do theirs. The task is never done. Burnout comes when we think it is all up to us. It is rather all up to God, who works over the ages.

Ministry is a slow process that spans generations. We burn out when we forget to build on the work of others and prepare for the next generation to come. Take care of your body, providing for its physical needs, and listen to the small voice in scripture so God can renew you each day in his word. The task is never yours alone. It belongs to the Lord, and you are just one cog in the great machine of the Kingdom of God. So hold onto the Lord and rely on His strength. Be patient. Ministry will always take more time than you think. Don't burn out. Rely on God and go for the long haul.

4 Passing the torch

2 Kings 2:1-18

Big idea: The ministry belongs to the Lord.

2 Kings 2:1-18 (NIV)

¹ When the LORD was about to take Elijah up to heaven in a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. ² Elijah said to Elisha, "Stay here; the LORD has sent me to Bethel." But Elisha said, "As surely as the LORD lives and as you live, I will not leave you." So they went down to Bethel. ³ The company of the prophets at Bethel came out to Elisha and asked, "Do you know that the LORD is going to take your master from you today?" "Yes, I know," Elisha replied, "but do not speak of it." ⁴ Then Elijah said to him, "Stay here, Elisha; the LORD has sent me to Jericho." And he replied, "As surely as the LORD lives and as you live, I will not leave you." So they went to Jericho. ⁵ The company of the prophets at Jericho went up to Elisha and asked him, "Do you know that the LORD is going to take your master from you today?" "Yes, I know," he replied, "but do not speak of it." ⁶ Then Elijah said to him, "Stay here; the LORD has sent me to the Jordan." And he replied, "As surely as the LORD lives and as you live, I will not leave you." So the two of them walked on. ⁷ Fifty men of the company of the prophets went and stood at a distance, facing the place where Elijah and Elisha had stopped at the Jordan. ⁸ Elijah took his cloak, rolled it up and struck the water with it. The water divided to the right and to the left, and the two of them crossed over on dry ground. ⁹ When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, "Tell me, what can I do for you before I am taken from you?" "Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit," Elisha replied. ¹⁰ "You have asked a difficult thing," Elijah said, "yet if you see me when I am taken from you, it will be yours--otherwise not." ¹¹ As they were walking along and talking together, suddenly a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared and separated the two of them, and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind. ¹² Elisha saw this and cried out, "My father! My father! The chariots and horsemen of Israel!" And Elisha saw him no more. Then he took hold of his own clothes and tore them apart. ¹³ He picked up the cloak that had fallen from Elijah and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan. ¹⁴ Then he took the cloak that had fallen from him and struck the water with it. "Where now is the LORD, the God of Elijah?" he asked. When he struck the water, it divided to the right and to the left, and he crossed over. ¹⁵ The company of the prophets from Jericho, who were watching, said, "The spirit of Elijah is resting on Elisha." And they went to meet him and bowed to the ground before him. ¹⁶ "Look," they said, "we your servants have fifty able men. Let them go and look for your master. Perhaps the Spirit of the LORD has picked him up and set him down on some mountain or in some valley." "No," Elisha replied, "do not send them." ¹⁷ But they persisted until he was too ashamed to refuse. So he said, "Send them." And they sent fifty men, who searched for three days but did not find him. ¹⁸ When they returned to Elisha, who was staying in Jericho, he said to them, "Didn't I tell you not to go?"

Everyone's ministry must come to an end v. 1 *When the LORD was about to take Elijah up to heaven in a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal.*

Over the years, I have watched laypeople come and go as presidents, treasurers, and council chairpersons. Sometimes a capable successor is found quickly, and sometimes someone who knows little of what they are doing fills the spot and does the best that they can. It makes me look at this text in a new way. One thing is sure. God will continue to work in the churches. Each of those people was replaced by another, and ministry went on. God continues to use pastors and laypeople to do his work. No one person is irreplaceable. All are just part of God's great plan.

The church, throughout the ages, must continue to stress that it is God who is in charge. It would be easy to think everything is complete when Moses, Elijah, or Paul finish their ministry. It would be easy to believe no one else can fill your place. But that is foolish, for the power was God's and ours. The torch must be passed in every case. How you pass the torch will improve the chance that the ministry goes on. The text shows how the torch is passed from Elijah to his beloved disciple Elisha. The ministry goes on seamlessly because of the handoff.

Passing the torch is our greatest task.

A. Use the time you have wisely v. 2 *Elijah said to Elisha, "Stay here; the LORD has sent me to Bethel." But Elisha said, "As surely as the LORD lives and as you live, I will not leave you." So they went down to Bethel.*

Everyone knew the time was short, so they wanted to make the most of their time. Elijah offers to leave Elisha behind, but the younger man wants to be with his mentor as long as possible. Even though they had worked together for years, there were still things to learn. It was a matter of devotion mixed with apprehension about whether he would be ready when Elijah did leave him. Here was the chance to walk with Elijah and keep learning from the experience and wisdom that the older man had.

Sadly, such mentoring rarely occurs in the church. Usually, an election happens in the voters, and the new person gets no mentoring from the old officer. They are lucky if they get a set of minutes and keep some of the committee members. So they start with a distinct disadvantage. Some churches try to have an overlap period in the congregation for their leaders. It is a good idea, but it only sometimes works. An experienced council member has a lot of wisdom and experience in that church and area that can be shared with others. It could make it easier to find a replacement.

B. Prepare for the future v. 3 *The company of the prophets at Bethel came out to Elisha and asked, "Do you know that the LORD is going to take your master from you today?" "Yes, I know," Elisha replied, "but do not speak of it."*

Elijah had groups of young prophets at Bethel, Jericho, and Gilgal. He was preparing for the future ministry and wanted to visit and encourage them one last time. The work of the Lord is only one generation away from extinction. So these men would reach out to places that Elijah could not. He had learned at his lowest moment that he was not alone. God had others, and he needed to help them grow. One of the greatest things a prophet could do was prepare others. God needed many tools in ministry, not just one great tool. Elijah would have a significant impact on the work of these men.

Committees can have a good purpose in preparing people for future leadership. They have a chance to see what works and what doesn't. They have an opportunity to think through the purpose of the committee and council. It is possible that they could be the breeding ground for new leaders. As one grows older, one realizes that time is short, and it becomes more critical to teach lay leaders. Someone else needs to run evangelism, education, and worship. Someone else needs to be present to keep the everyday activities of the church going as well. Mentor and expand the ministry for the future.

C. Learn from the past v. 4 *Then Elijah said to him, "Stay here, Elisha; the LORD has sent me to Jericho.*

The final trip was a history lesson of the past. Gilgal was the place where Israel camped in the Promised Land. Bethel was the place of Abraham and Jacob. Jericho was the place of the great victory of Joshua and the people. Each location had something special to teach the younger prophet. They were visible reminders of what God had done and would continue to do for his people. Such memories would help the younger prophet learn to depend on God and remain steadfast in faith when life got tough. God had shown that He could be trusted in every situation.

A few people have been at our church through fires, embezzlement, road projects, and building projects; they can attest to all that the Lord has been with us through good times and bad. Resiliency and patience are two of the strengths of this church. So many churches would not have survived those trials. Yet, each of those trials showed the graciousness of our God and His great desire to continue ministering through this church. The church might have died several times, but God provided funding, new people, and opportunities so that the church grew and prospered. As a result, troubles made us trust God even more.

D. Give others your spirit v. 9 *When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, "Tell me, what can I do for you before I am taken from you?" "Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit," Elisha replied.*

He could have asked for riches or fame. Instead, he wanted a double measure of the courage, faithfulness, and obedience that Elijah had shown in ministry. He knew that ministry would be challenging in pagan Israel but that God would help if he walked with God as Elijah had. One would assume that the two of them had worked together over the years, much of that had rubbed off from the prophet to his protégé. Elisha wanted it to stick so he could be the man Elijah had trained him to be. He wanted to continue the ministry that Elijah had started for the Lord.

Younger members need to take over, but current leaders must work to help them by letting them mature and giving their spirit to the younger ones. We can touch each other, so they have courage and faith and are ready to take over the tasks as we move on to other things. We often say that the church belongs to the youth but have we prepared them? What are we doing to help the younger members who are the church's future? So often, not what you do but who you build up determines if you have made a difference in ministry.

Lessons when the day comes

Separation can be painful v. 12 *Elisha saw this and cried out, "My father! My father! The chariots and horsemen of Israel!" And Elisha saw him no more. Then he took hold of his clothes and tore them apart.*

The moment finally came, and it was as bad as Elisha feared. It was like a son who mourned the loss of a beloved father. Elijah's death proved as spectacular as his life. Yet, it was also as private as he had often been. Elisha had no body to cry over. Elijah's departure lasted only a moment, and only one person could witness it before he was gone. The separation was painful, but it left Elisha with only one choice. He was to return and do the ministry the Lord had prepared him to do. He was to honor Elijah by continuing the work that they had done together for these last years. He was now the prophet, and Elijah was just a memory.

Over the years, I have watched leaders come and go. Some got older or died. Some just moved on. I mourn their loss, but many of those people have touched me. I would be less if I did not know and learn from them. I wish all of them were still here today. A piece of Elijah was always with Elisha. That is the joy of learning from each other. The things we learn from each other become our strengths, even when they are gone. God is in control and will be there to help new people in all his churches when leaders are gone. He never leaves or forsakes us.

Trust the Lord to empower your successor v. 14 *Then he took the cloak that had fallen from him and struck the water with it. "Where now is the LORD, the God of Elijah?" he asked. When he struck the water, it divided to the right and the left, and he crossed over.*

Elisha's first act was to take up the cloak of Elijah that had fallen. It was his way of accepting the responsibilities that came from succeeding the prophet. His second act was to part the waters of the Jordan just as Elijah had done and Joshua had done many centuries before. He was now God's prophet and the leader of the ministry. Elijah had trusted that the Lord would empower his successor; so He had. As a result of God's blessing, Elisha has twice the miracles recorded in scripture that Elijah does. He is the one who will finally rid Israel of the false God Baal. He is the one who will cure a leper and confront kings on God's behalf. Ministry continues.

Churches have vacancies regularly. People tend to come and go in ministry. We could be afraid of those things, but we need not be. God will provide, and we must keep working to help those who step into those positions feel empowered. God continues to work through His people. The congregation has an ebb and flow as leaders come and go. Let us trust people and mentor them so that they feel comfortable doing the work that they have been given. Let them know that ministry is not about us. The work belongs to the Lord. Amen.

5 Elisha appeals to God

2 Kings 4:15-37

Big idea: Genuine Kindness is Never Unrewarded

2 Kings 4:15-37 (NIV)

¹⁵ Then Elisha said, "Call her." So he called her, and she stood in the doorway. ¹⁶ "About this time next year," Elisha said, "you will hold a son in your arms." "No, my lord," she objected. "Don't mislead your servant, O man of God!" ¹⁷ But the woman became pregnant, and the next year about that same time she gave birth to a son, just as Elisha had told her. ¹⁸ The child grew, and one day he went out to his father, who was with the reapers. ¹⁹ "My head! My head!" he said to his father. His father told a servant, "Carry him to his mother." ²⁰ After the servant had lifted him up and carried him to his mother, the boy sat on her lap until noon, and then he died. ²¹ She went up and laid him on the bed of the man of God, then shut the door and went out. ²² She called her husband and said, "Please send me one of the servants and a donkey so I can go to the man of God quickly and return." ²³ "Why go to him today?" he asked. "It's not the New Moon or the Sabbath." "It's all right," she said. ²⁴ She saddled the donkey and said to her servant, "Lead on; don't slow down for me unless I tell you." ²⁵ So she set out and came to the man of God at Mount Carmel. When he saw her in the distance, the man of God said to his servant Gehazi, "Look! There's the Shunammite!" ²⁶ Run to meet her and ask her, 'Are you all right? Is your husband all right? Is your child all right?'" "Everything is all right," she said. ²⁷ When she reached the man of God at the mountain, she took hold of his feet. Gehazi came over to push her away, but the man of God said, "Leave her alone! She is in bitter distress, but the LORD has hidden it from me and has not told me why." ²⁸ "Did I ask you for a son, my lord?" she said. "Didn't I tell you, 'Don't raise my hopes?'" ²⁹ Elisha said to Gehazi, "Tuck your cloak into your belt, take my staff in your hand and run. If you meet anyone, do not greet him, and if anyone greets you, do not answer. Lay my staff on the boy's face." ³⁰ But the child's mother said, "As surely as the LORD lives and as you live, I will not leave you." So he got up and followed her. ³¹ Gehazi went on ahead and laid the staff on the boy's face, but there was no sound or response. So Gehazi went back to meet Elisha and told him, "The boy has not awakened." ³² When Elisha reached the house, there was the boy lying dead on his couch. ³³ He went in, shut the door on the two of them and prayed to the LORD. ³⁴ Then he got on the bed and lay upon the boy, mouth to mouth, eyes to eyes, hands to hands. As he stretched himself out upon him, the boy's body grew warm. ³⁵ Elisha turned away and walked back and forth in the room and then got on the bed and stretched out upon him once more. The boy sneezed seven times and opened his eyes. ³⁶ Elisha summoned Gehazi and said, "Call the Shunammite." And he did. When she came, he said, "Take your son." ³⁷ She came in, fell at his feet and bowed to the ground. Then she took her son and went out.

Kindness is a strength, not a weakness.

It is the virtue that is often preached and yet is often hard to do. We see kindness as a duty of the Christian life. God wants us to be kind, so we do it for someone else even though we may resent the time or the required effort. Others may even see our kindness as a weakness. But kindness has its rewards. It builds a group of people into our lives who are willing to help us when the chips are down. It builds stronger relationships because they are built on service and care rather than forced or just because we have some connection to each other.

It is in the power of every human being to show kindness. It doesn't take incredible amounts of money or skills. It just takes one person being concerned about the needs of others. It just takes courage to reach out, not knowing if the generosity or kindness will ever be repaid. As we will see in this text, genuine kindness is often rewarded in that relationships are built, and God can work miracles through those relationships. Likewise, our God rewards compassion and works through the kindness we do to allow others to give His help in return. The kind will find special blessings.

A story of kindness given and received

A. A woman shows kindness to Elisha v. 8 *One day Elisha went to Shunem. And a well-to-do woman was there, who urged him to stay for a meal. So whenever he came by, he stopped there to eat.*

Shunem was halfway between Elisha's hometown of Abel Meholah and Mt. Carmel, where he often traveled to minister to the school of prophets and meditated on his ministry. A wealthy woman lived in Shunem there and saw the opportunity to serve God by serving the prophet. It began by offering him a meal and evolved into building a room in her home for Elisha and his servant. One imagines friendship building because of the kindness that she showed. The frequent visits connected them and showed God's love for His prophet.

It often begins when we see someone in need. There is no reason to reach out and help, but we do. We show kindness and concern to one who needs a helping hand. What was a one-time event becomes a habit, and a friendship is quickly born. We don't do this act of compassion because we have to, but it becomes something that brings us joy and may even give us a warm feeling inside. We feel useful and valued and enjoy the friendship we are building or renewing after a long absence. Kindness has its rewards.

B. Elisha wants to return the kindness v. 16 *"About this time next year," Elisha said, "you will hold a son in your arms."*

Elisha is grateful and appreciates the kindness. He wonders what he can do in return for the generosity of the woman and her husband. He asks his servant to see if there is something that he can do. It turns out that the woman had no children to inherit her husband's property and care for her later in life. The woman is self-conscious and doesn't want to impose on the man of God. She even finds it hard to acknowledge that God would grant her deepest desire. Yet, Elijah and the Lord give the gift in response to her kindness. She will have a child from God for all she has done for the prophet.

It is awkward when someone wants to repay us for our kindness. We didn't do the good deed to get some payback. We did it because it was the right thing to do and made us feel better. In those times, we must graciously accept the gifts people want to give because we have provided something for them. Someone who has been helped often wants to do something in return. It is a sign of their gratitude and the relationship being formed between the two of you. Such giving and taking continue to build people's bonds with one another. It also encourages us to give even more as the friendship develops.

C. Crisis comes to everyone's life v. 20 *After the servant had lifted him and carried him to his mother, the boy sat on her lap until noon, and then he died.*

Suddenly, an overwhelming crisis comes upon the woman. Her son gets sick and dies. She knows just where to go. She lays the child on Elisha's bed and hurries to find him before someone decides to bury the dead boy as the body decays in the warm climate. She will impose on their friendship because she knows he cares. It is an act of faith and an act of desperation. She believes in both God and Elisha. Perhaps she knows of how Elijah raised the child of a woman who was kind to him. Consequently, she will plead with Elisha because she has no other options and because this is the deepest loss of her life.

In those moments of desperation, we ask what we would never have dared to ask before. Kindness has created a bond, so we pray that our friends can do what we cannot do. We may need a ride to the hospital at 3 AM or someone to fix a broken water pipe in the basement. Friendship creates hope. We hope this person can help us when we can't deal with this problem alone. We have been kind to them, and they have responded kindly to us. We need their continued kindness amid a crisis to overcome the problem. Surely they will help.

D. The greatest kindness is given v. 35 *Elisha turned away and walked back and forth in the room and then got on the bed and stretched out upon him once more. The boy sneezed seven times and opened his eyes.*

Elisha returns immediately. He even sends his servant, who is younger and can run faster, to go ahead of him and prevent anyone from disturbing the body. Elisha must have been thinking, what did Elijah do when he raised a boy from the dead? He begins by praying and then by laying on top of the boy. God brings warmth to the boy's body, and Elisha paces the room, praying again and laying on top of the boy a second time. Finally, God answered his prayer, and the boy began to sneeze, letting the prophet know he was alive. Elisha is God's agent of healing mercy and compassion to this family.

None of us have raised someone from the dead, but many have been there to help someone at 3 AM, drive them to an appointment, or fix something in their home. We may have even doubted our abilities and prayed that the Lord would help us to do something nearly impossible for us. God helps us in times of crisis to do something significant for others. Because of the relationship that kindness has built, we are willing to try and often succeed at doing something meaningful for someone else. Their service started things out and made our compassion possible.

Kindness is its reward.

Kindness builds friends we can depend on v. 22 *She called her husband and said, "Please send me one of the servants and a donkey so I can go to the man of God quickly and return.*

How many other women in ancient Israel would have dared ask Elisha for such a favor? She didn't provide him food or a room so that he could do miracles for her. Her kindness built a relationship that gave her the confidence to ask the impossible. Her son was dead, and she needed help. She won't even speak to the servant about her problem. Instead, she fell at Elisha's feet and expressed her grief. She touched his heart with her own because she knew he was her only hope. If anyone could save her son, it was this man of God. God would listen to him and do a miracle.

Such is the power of kindness. Of course, we would never ask for such favors from strangers. We know that they won't help us in the middle of the night or do something to assist us in a major crisis. Kindness builds friendships that we can lean on in times of trouble. They will help when others will not. We think of kindness as a weakness, but it is a strength. It creates a series of friendships we can rely on when life gets tough. It makes a group of people who care about what happens to you and want to help you out, even if it may be difficult or costly for them.

Kindness makes their problems now our problems v. 33 *He went in, shut the door on the two of them, and prayed to the LORD.*

In short, her problem became the prophet's problem. He felt her anguish when she fell at his feet, and her pain became his. This child was no ordinary child that was dead. It was a child he had watched grow up and had cared about for years. This problem was personal, and he brought his pain to the Lord. He wanted the child to live almost as much as she did. He paced the floor, prayed fervently, and laid on the child as he knew Elijah had done. Kindness had bound him to the woman and her child. Lord, raise this child as a favor to your prophet and bring glory to your name.

Those who have shown kindness become that dear to us. We do things for them not because we have to but because their problems are our problems. We want to succeed and bring more joy into our relationship with them. We want to help in a crisis, for we feel the situation as our own. Kindness has the power to bind people. It may start small, but the love and generosity grow so that the strength we have for each other is stronger than the abilities of the individuals. It is a joy to be part of a community and of friendships that are there in our time of need. Kindness is often the beginning of that love.

6 God heals the humble

2 Kings 5:1-19

Big idea: Humble people get more than they ask for from God.

2 Kings 5:1-19 (NIV)

¹ Now Naaman was commander of the army of the king of Aram. He was a great man in the sight of his master and highly regarded, because through him the LORD had given victory to Aram. He was a valiant soldier, but he had leprosy. ² Now bands from Aram had gone out and had taken captive a young girl from Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. ³ She said to her mistress, "If only my master would see the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy." ⁴ Naaman went to his master and told him what the girl from Israel had said. ⁵ "By all means, go," the king of Aram replied. "I will send a letter to the king of Israel." So Naaman left, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold and ten sets of clothing. ⁶ The letter that he took to the king of Israel read: "With this letter I am sending my servant Naaman to you so that you may cure him of his leprosy." ⁷ As soon as the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his robes and said, "Am I God? Can I kill and bring back to life? Why does this fellow send someone to me to be cured of his leprosy? See how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me!" ⁸ When Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his robes, he sent him this message: "Why have you torn your robes? Have the man come to me and he will know that there is a prophet in Israel." ⁹ So Naaman went with his horses and chariots and stopped at the door of Elisha's house. ¹⁰ Elisha sent a messenger to say to him, "Go, wash yourself seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh will be restored and you will be cleansed." ¹¹ But Naaman went away angry and said, "I thought that he would surely come out to me and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, wave his hand over the spot and cure me of my leprosy. ¹² Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than any of the waters of Israel? Couldn't I wash in them and be cleansed?" So he turned and went off in a rage. ¹³ Naaman's servants went to him and said, "My father, if the prophet had told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much more, then, when he tells you, 'Wash and be cleansed!'" ¹⁴ So he went down and dipped himself in the Jordan seven times, as the man of God had told him, and his flesh was restored and became clean like that of a young boy. ¹⁵ Then Naaman and all his attendants went back to the man of God. He stood before him and said, "Now I know that there is no God in all the world except in Israel. Please accept now a gift from your servant." ¹⁶ The prophet answered, "As surely as the LORD lives, whom I serve, I will not accept a thing." And even though Naaman urged him, he refused. ¹⁷ "If you will not," said Naaman, "please let me, your servant, be given as much earth as a pair of mules can carry, for your servant will never again make burnt offerings and sacrifices to any other god but the LORD. ¹⁸ But may the LORD forgive your servant for this one thing: When my master enters the temple of Rimmon to bow down and he is leaning on my arm and I bow there also--when I bow down in the temple of Rimmon, may the LORD forgive your servant for this." ¹⁹ "Go in peace," Elisha said. After Naaman had traveled some distance,

When life is too difficult, it is time to be humble v. 1 *Now Naaman was commander of the army of the king of Aram. He was a great man in the sight of his master and highly regarded because through him, the LORD had given victory to Aram. He was a valiant soldier, but he had leprosy.*

He was on top of the world with great prestige, authority, and wealth. He was the second most powerful man in the kingdom of Aram and the general that had defeated the Assyrians in battle. He had one problem. He was dying of leprosy, a slow, painful death that would bring his demise. Most Israelites would have been happy to see him gone. He was an enemy who kidnapped Jewish women and a leper who should be in isolation and not praised. Instead, he is mentioned in the New Testament by Jesus to the people of Nazareth, who are angry that Jesus mentions Naaman in lofty terms.

He needed help, and all his accomplishments would be wiped out by this disease, like a rich man today who gets cancer or is hospitalized with an infectious disease. Only the power of God could heal him and make him well. Yet for that to happen, God had to change his heart as well as his body. He will have to lose his temper and his pride before he can gain the healing of his body and his soul that the Lord wants him to have. This text shows the danger of pride and the healing that can come through humility as we bow before God and follow His ways.

Pride gets in our way.

A. Naaman thinks he has to buy God's help v. 5 *By all means, go," the king of Aram replied. "I will send a letter to the king of Israel." So Naaman left, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten sets of clothing.*

False gods are bought and paid for, but the true God gives only grace to those who believe. It was a lesson that Naaman had to learn. He thought he had to treat the true God like the gods of Aram. So he amassed a fortune of gold, silver, and clothes worth over a million dollars to buy the healing of God. He didn't yet know of the grace of God and didn't know that you can't buy God's love or barter for His gifts. He was desperate and thought you dealt with kings and gods like other people. You give them gifts so that they will give you what you desperately need in return.

Those who don't know God make things complicated when God's ways are so simple. They think they have to donate wings to hospitals and churches to get noticed by God. They beg leaders and pastors to speak to God on their behalf. They don't understand the concept of grace. What can you give to a God who owns everything? How can you force a God who is so powerful that he can command demons, nature, and nations with a single word? There is no bargaining with God, for we have nothing to offer. All is grace given freely by a loving God eager to help His children.

B. Naaman wants to tell God what to do v. 11 *But Naaman went away angry and said, "I thought that he would surely come out to me and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, wave his hand over the spot and cure me of my leprosy."*

He had traveled over 100 miles and had made up his mind about how healing should appear. The magicians of his kingdom would have waved their hands and cast spells to give a cure. God must work in that manner as well. That the Lord would say to bathe in a dirty river was humiliating. Naaman, the general, was used to ordering people around and thought he could also command God and His prophet. Healing was so close, but he needed to follow God rather than make God follow him. He was ready to march back to Damascus, believing that Elisha and God were idiots.

People today want to set rules for God. They want to tell him what is right and wrong. They want to do good works and have God recognize them as being special. They want to tell churches how they can help the poor, run adoptions, or what they can say in public. They walk away from the Lord because God refuses to bend to their expectations or work according to their plans. They call the church and its people foolish because we can't see their logic when they will not look at our faith. Pride gets in the way of healing and help. They belong to Satan and will not submit.

Humility will bring answers and help.

C. Seek God as the one true answer v. 8 *When Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his robes, he sent him this message: "Why have you torn your robes? Have the man come to me and he will know that there is a prophet in Israel."*

King Joram had a golden opportunity to build peace between Israel and its enemy. He also had a chance to show that God alone was the true God. He did neither. It was Elisha who reached out to give glory to the Lord of all. He invites Naaman to see what the true God could do. The true answer for Naaman lies not in the gods of Aram or the kings of Israel. It lies in the God of Israel, just as his wife's servant had said. So Elisha invites this mighty warrior to seek out God and His answer and learn about the real power of the one who controls everything.

Humility realizes that there are many things that man cannot do or control. Our wisdom is limited, and often new technologies bring more questions than answers. Our power is finite, and using human power often does more damage than good. Seeking answers without God causes us to wander and get lost. The humble will recognize the invitation from God and come to him for answers and help. God sends invitations all the time to people. If they are desperate enough and willing to cast away their pride, they will find what they are looking for because God knows their needs better than they do.

D. He follows God's will when it seems foolish v. 14 *So he went down and dipped himself in the Jordan seven times, as the man of God had told him, and his flesh was restored and became clean like that of a young boy.*

The secret to Naaman's healing was that he obeyed. He was willing to travel 30 miles from Samaria and bathe in an obscure river just because God told him to do so. There was no logic in this course of events. What he had was faith borne of desperation. He was dying, and this brought hope. He would have gone on a quest or battled a fierce army to be healed. Instead, God had asked something simple, and he had obeyed. He was placing his future in God's hands for the first time in his life, knowing that God, not he, was in control. As promised, healing came, for God could do the impossible.

Obedience is still our greatest requirement for receiving God's blessings. We must put aside the pride that requires God to do things our way. We must set aside the questions that make us doubt what God says will work. Instead, we must have faith to follow God fully, knowing He is right. Miracles happen when people trust and follow the Lord. The miracles defy our logic and challenge our courage and our doubts. We need to believe that God is always right and humble ourselves before His will and call. God knows what He is doing. God has the power to do all things. These tenets form the core of our belief.

Humility is powerful

God breaks through with humble voices v. 13 *Naaman's servants went to him and said, "My father, if the prophet had told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much more, then, when he tells you, 'Wash and be cleansed!'"*

She was a captured slave. He was her master. The men were servants. He was a great general. Neither the girl nor the servants are given names. Nevertheless, history records Naaman's name for posterity. Theirs were humble voices that dared to tell him what to do when he had lost his way. They were reason in his fog. God used the meek to accomplish His purpose. Naaman did not listen to the prophet's command, but the servants' humble voices persuaded him to believe. Some would have thought he was a fool for bathing in the Jordan. But it made perfect sense to these humble people, and a miracle happened.

I still find that God uses humble people to move us to do great things. They are people who do not intimidate us but dare to tell the simple truth. In His way, God ambushes us when we are least expecting it. We hear the truth, which takes control because our defenses are not up. At that moment, faith is created. We are desperate enough that there is nothing to lose and everything to gain. We understand that God can do all things and is not asking for us to move mountains but to believe and follow. The humble can work miracles, for they have the power of God.

God gives new life as well as healing v. 15 *Then Naaman and all his attendants went back to the man of God. He stood before him and said, "Now I know that there is no God in all the world except in Israel."*

God didn't just want to do a miracle. He wanted to create faith. Naaman was healed in body and soul. He desired to take the soil of Israel home and make a place where he could worship God. People would ask what he was doing, and they would hear about the miracle that God had done. He would have to go to the pagan temple, but he wanted Elisha to know that his heart would not be in it. Yahweh would be his God, and he would become a missionary to his people so they could learn of the wisdom and power of the true God of Israel. God had changed his health and his heart.

God still wants to change the hearts of people. He wants to take them from self-pride to faith. The Lord wants them to look to Him for miracles and help in every situation. He wants them to tell all their friends about this loving God who can also change their lives. Social standing and power meant nothing. Humble faith meant everything. The master had now become the servant of God and was willing to bow before the one who had loved him enough to bring him healing and faith. He would be a humble ambassador of the true and living God of Israel for life.

7 God is the solution, not man
2 Kings 6:8-23
Big idea: God is the key in times of trouble.

2 Kings 6:8-23 (NIV)

⁸ Now the king of Aram was at war with Israel. After conferring with his officers, he said, "I will set up my camp in such and such a place." ⁹ The man of God sent word to the king of Israel: "Beware of passing that place, because the Arameans are going down there." ¹⁰ So the king of Israel checked on the place indicated by the man of God. Time and again Elisha warned the king, so that he was on his guard in such places. ¹¹ This enraged the king of Aram. He summoned his officers and demanded of them, "Will you not tell me which of us is on the side of the king of Israel?" ¹² "None of us, my lord the king," said one of his officers, "but Elisha, the prophet who is in Israel, tells the king of Israel the very words you speak in your bedroom." ¹³ "Go, find out where he is," the king ordered, "so I can send men and capture him." The report came back: "He is in Dothan." ¹⁴ Then he sent horses and chariots and a strong force there. They went by night and surrounded the city. ¹⁵ When the servant of the man of God got up and went out early the next morning, an army with horses and chariots had surrounded the city. "Oh, my lord, what shall we do?" the servant asked. ¹⁶ "Don't be afraid," the prophet answered. "Those who are with us are more than those who are with them." ¹⁷ And Elisha prayed, "O LORD, open his eyes so he may see." Then the LORD opened the servant's eyes, and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha. ¹⁸ As the enemy came down toward him, Elisha prayed to the LORD, "Strike these people with blindness." So he struck them with blindness, as Elisha had asked. ¹⁹ Elisha told them, "This is not the road and this is not the city. Follow me, and I will lead you to the man you are looking for." And he led them to Samaria. ²⁰ After they entered the city, Elisha said, "LORD, open the eyes of these men so they can see." Then the LORD opened their eyes and they looked, and there they were, inside Samaria. ²¹ When the king of Israel saw them, he asked Elisha, "Shall I kill them, my father? Shall I kill them?" ²² "Do not kill them," he answered. "Would you kill men you have captured with your own sword or bow? Set food and water before them so that they may eat and drink and then go back to their master." ²³ So he prepared a great feast for them, and after they had finished eating and drinking, he sent them away, and they returned to their master. So the bands from Aram stopped raiding Israel's territory.

God alone is our helper in trouble.

We live in a time of fools. Man has the solution to every disease. Man can cure the problems with the economy and the shortages on the shelves. Man can fix the issue of violence in our cities and unify the races. That is what we hear all the time. How do you think it is going? The days of Elisha were days of unbelievers as well. Jehoram, the second son of Ahab, was on the throne, and while he was better than his father, he did not believe in God. Yet, God would help the people in those days. Elisha would provide God's help, and sometimes they would listen.

Their willingness to listen to God, even if they did not believe in Him, was the answer to their troubles. The Syrians were destroying cities with guerrilla warfare. God would provide solutions and help. The key actor in this text is God, not the prophet or the people. God alone saves. Oh, that we had such wisdom today. God speaks, and no one listens as their solutions cause more problems. They speak in their knowledge across the media, acting like they know it all and don't need God or anyone else. Both the right and the left are fools because they leave God out of the picture.

Who is this God we worship?

A. He is the God who sees all v. 12 *"None of us, my lord the king," said one of his officers, "but Elisha, the prophet who is in Israel, tells the king of Israel the very words you speak in your bedroom."*

Who is this God whom mankind ignores? He is the God who sees all. Whenever the Syrians planned a raid, God would inform the prophet, who would warn the king and his people. The information was so

precise that the Syrians thought a traitor existed in their camp. While God did not support the corrupt monarch of Israel, he showed concern for His people. He knew the raids were harming the people in the scattered villages and troops of Israel. He saw what man could not see and provided the information for a genuine solution that baffled the enemy.

Man is still blind and doesn't listen to God's trustworthy solutions to all our problems. God has proclaimed that justice doesn't come by ignoring crime. God has shown that people must take responsibility for their future rather than expecting handouts from others to solve their problems. God sees the truth, which has been spelled out in His scriptures. The wise will study his word and seek His answers if they want to solve the problems that face our world. Unfortunately, the foolish in our world spout their views and ignore God because He disagrees with them, causing the world to spiral downward.

B. He is the God who protects His people v. 17 *And Elisha prayed, "O LORD, open his eyes so he may see." Then the LORD opened the servant's eyes, and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.*

A ring of horses and chariots from Syria surrounded Elisha, giving him little chance of escaping or surviving an attack. It caused Elisha's servant to tremble in fear. Elisha prayed not for a victory but for the servant to see the incredible power of God. Such a vision soothed the servant's nerves. God had been protecting the kingdom of Israel, and He would safeguard His servant. He would not die before the time that the Lord had appointed, even if all the world's armies were against him. The prophet knew that the Lord had given him a task and the Lord would allow him to complete his ministry.

Christians live by faith as they see the problems facing the church. Some people complain about the smaller numbers in church or the evil in the world, thinking that we need to do something to curb the wickedness around us. God tells us to look to the hills and see the power of our Lord. God is the one who will save his church. God is the one who has the answer to racial tension and the evil in our cities. God's people need to proclaim the message of scripture so that the Holy Spirit can change the hearts of men. God can do what man can never do. So give glory to God and trust in Him.

C. He is the God who shows mercy v. 22 *"Do not kill them," he answered. "Would you kill men you have captured with your own sword or bow? Set food and water before them so that they may eat and drink and then go back to their master."*

God will be victorious because He is a God of mercy and not violence. Jehoram, the king, thinks that the solution is to kill the enemy. But, as with nations today, defeat only promotes retaliation. The Syrians would have just sent another company of soldiers ready to avenge their brothers who died. God shows mercy, knowing that having a meal with them was the same as making a covenant of peace. The feast would end the raids because they would finally see that they could not defeat the power of God. It would show kindness, making it hard to respond to evil.

So much of man's answer to problems is to wage war against them and trample them to the ground. We think will defeat the Russians, the Democrats, or the Republicans. We think will stamp out crime by making them pay and lift our race over the races of others. It is an angry response that only promotes violence. God has a better way. He is a God of mercy. Show kindness to those of other nations and races. Let the people of the inner city flourish with better jobs and homes. Please eliminate the mandates and provide opportunities to unite people instead of dividing them. Love conquers hate and brings joy, not suffering.

What should we learn from Elisha?

To see that God alone is in control v. 15 *When the servant of the man of God got up and went out early the following day, an army with horses and chariots had surrounded the city. "Oh, my lord, what shall we do?" the servant asked.*

Elisha never troubled himself about the enemy. His concern was for his frightened servant. If this servant was going to walk with Elisha and serve God, the young man would face many dangers during his ministry. He had to learn to trust the Lord. He needed to see that God was in control. Fear has grappled the nation and the church, fueled by governments and media. Sadly, many have asked if the last days are coming and if the end of the church is near. As a result, we have locked churches down during pandemics and almost pretended like safety was more important than getting people into scripture.

Sometimes the church seems to have forgotten God and relied on science as its savior. If we can get everyone vaccinated, all will be fine. I think vaccines are potent, but where is the reliance on God? Where are the prayers of churches and the faith of God's people in His power over nature and illness? I pray that the Lord will open the eyes of the church. Let the church see how God will protect them and help them through this time of trouble so that the church can prevail. Let them pray weekly and move forward in ministry, knowing that the Lord is the only one who can help in this time of trouble.

To conquer the world through mercy, not violence v. 21 *When the king of Israel saw them, he asked Elisha, "Shall I kill them, my father? Shall I kill them?"*

The king sought to use his advantage and destroy the enemy. He would have claimed a great victory for himself in the short run that would have brought disaster to the nation for years to come. Destroying this piece of the enemy would not have brought peace. Instead, it would have brought all-out war. Elisha counsels for mercy. Feeding the opposing army and sending them home humbled taught them that God was able to lead them blindly to their demise and that the enemy was nobler than they were. God's mercy ends the army raids and peace to the people.

I pray that the eyes of the world might be open to the power of God's mercy. Angry mobs get an angry response, while compassion will bring lasting solutions in the long run. Let the governments bring opportunities, not mandates. Let the nations work for peace around the world. While the poor demand handouts as their right, giving them opportunities for hard work to gain a better life. Let those in power care about those they serve and live with Christian character instead of rage with those who disagree with them. Let them see and follow the ways of God.

Show the world the character of God v. 23 *So he prepared a great feast for them, and after they had finished eating and drinking, he sent them away, and they returned to their master. So the bands from Aram stopped raiding Israel's territory.*

If you want the world to solve the current set of problems, you need to show them the character of God. Elisha showed both Israel and Aram the power and mercy of God, and the Syrians didn't bother Israel for several years. They saw that they could not defeat God and were humbled by the love of God. In our current day, the vision has to start with the church. We have to start talking more about the qualities of our God. We must show the broken that the Lord can help them through their troubles. We must teach the nation that God cares and has solutions they haven't dreamed of.

Too often, the church listens to the government and society and follows its ways. Instead, the church has to speak the gospel truth and live the character of our God. It must let God's light shine in a dark world. It must seek places where we can proclaim the Lord instead of just funding the culture. If we want the world to be different and solve its problems, we must open their eyes to the fact that God is in charge and that He is a God of mercy who will help those in need. We should not be silent or fearful any longer. Let God's truth shine brightly, and the world will be a better place.