

Joshua 23, Celebration Service, 10/2/22

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[0 : 00] Joshua 23. A long time afterward, when the Lord had given rest to Israel from all their surrounding enemies, and Joshua was old and well advanced in years, Joshua summoned all Israel, its elders and heads, its judges and officers, and said to them, I am now old and well advanced in years.

And you have seen all that the Lord your God has done to all these nations for your sake. For it is the Lord your God who has fought for you.

Behold, I have allotted to you as an inheritance for your tribes, these nations that remain along with all the nations that I have already cut off from the Jordan to the great sea in the West.

The Lord your God will push them back before you and drive them out of your sight. And you shall possess their land, just as the Lord your God promised you.

Therefore, be very strong and keep and do all that is written in the book of the law of Moses, turning aside from it neither to the right hand nor to the left, that you may not mix with these nations remaining among you, or make mention of the names of their gods, or swear by them, or serve them, or bow down to them.

[1 : 24] But you shall cling to the Lord your God, just as you have done to this day. For the Lord has driven out before you great and strong nations.

As for you, no man has been able to stand before you to this day. One man of you puts to flight a thousand, since it is the Lord your God who fights for you, just as he promised you.

Be very careful, therefore, to love the Lord your God. For if you turn back and cling to the remnant of these nations remaining among you, and make marriages with them so that you associate with them and they with you, know for certain that the Lord your God will no longer drive out these nations before you, but they shall be a snare and a trap for you, a whip on your sides and a thorn in your eyes, until you perish from off this good ground that the Lord your God has given you.

And now, I am about to go the way of all the earth, and you know in your hearts and souls, all of you, that not one word has failed of all the good things that the Lord your God promised concerning you.

All have come to pass for you. Not one of them has failed. But just as all the good things that the Lord your God promised concerning you have been fulfilled for you, so the Lord will bring upon you all the evil things until he has destroyed you from off this good land that the Lord your God has given you.

[3 : 03] If you transgress the covenant of the Lord your God which he commanded you, and go and serve other gods and bow down to them, then the anger of the Lord will be kindled against you, and you shall perish quickly from off the good land that he has given to you.

This is the word of the Lord. Please be seated. Well, let me add my warmest greetings to each one of you for joining us today on what is a great day of celebration, one that I trust will look back on in coming years and decades, and say I was there when they got it underway.

I am personally deeply appreciative of the many ways you've entered into the life of this church, and how you have contributed to this occasion with happiness and joy.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you.

[5 : 19] us as the book closes that Joshua stands in the pulpit with Israel before him and preaches one last sermon. It says to all of Israel, but it also seems to indicate that it's especially directed to those who would lead God's family in the future after him. For them, what God had done is signaled in the first three verses. The narrator lets you know that it was a long time afterward when the Lord had given rest to Israel from all their surrounding enemies, and Joshua was old and well advanced in years. He summoned all of Israel, namely the elders and heads, judges, and officers, and said to them, I am now old and advanced in years, and you have seen all that the Lord your God has done to those nations for your sake. For it is the Lord your God who has fought for you. He directs the congregation's attention to the past that they would reflect on the fulfilled promises of God. In fact, you heard it read later in the chapter as if to reiterate it and put a stamp on it. Not one of all God's good promises has failed. He's fulfilled each one. Now for them, it wasn't the completed renovation of a building. Let's be clear. It was the securing of rest in the land, a promise that had been made centuries before to Abram, carried on through Israel's hard and happy history. But now in this moment fulfilled. The similarity though between what God had done for them and what we are commemorating here today is clear and it's obvious. God has secured for us a place to have fellowship with him. Now, if you haven't been around, you need to know that we didn't have homes and booths like they did in the wilderness, but we did spend 35 weeks on gravel, whether it be a hundred degrees with Pastor Nee's iPad notes going out of him from the heat and having to preach extemporaneously from which I said, hallelujah, to 18 degrees wind chill with rain sweeping through the parking lot and the congregation itself growing under canopies and umbrellas. We have seen God provide a place to have fellowship with him. And this was on the backside, was it not, of some 62 weeks online when the church was isolated from one another. I would rise and enter into this very building, didn't look anything like it looks now, and I would preach from this phone, same phone, on a little tripod in an effort to reach people in their homes as the city had shut down. In fact, the whole world had 62 weeks of isolation, 35 weeks outdoors. And today we move from the isolation of online to the gravel, to sitting under stained glass.

give God his due. It's taken everything from nearly all of you, but we stand together to say, as we see in verse 3, the Lord your God fought for you. Like Joshua of old, we have seen a thing or two of our own.

And this morning, I'm just going to recount two of them for you, because some of you have not yet heard the story of how we have seen God fight for us, both in the securing of this building and in the funding of the renovation.

So I'm going to stop and put it in your mind. It was early in our time where Pastor Dennis and I determined, as we got the work underway in 98, to not try to secure property.

We felt God was asking us to secure future workers. And every time we had the littlest bit of money in us, which never was much, we decided to try to start another congregation in another part of the city.

[10 : 43] Did we not? Because we believe that the church is the people of God, not the buildings in which they meet. We gave 20 years to this. No intention of feeling the necessity of a place until we arrived at heaven.

Yet, it was October 21st, 2017, that the leadership of this particular congregation went away, elders and deacons and community group leaders. And on that day, in 2017, I asked a simple question of the five or six tables where they were all gathered. Next 10 years, what would God have us do?

For the first time in our history, I didn't expect it. I don't think anyone came thinking about it. Each table, one of the top three things they felt we should begin praying for was property within the city.

They didn't know how long we'd be able to meet in the city without property we could call our own. We were watching what was taking place in New York City at the time when public schools were in contention in regard to faith-based ministries.

And so, even within our own leadership, they said, Lord willing, over the next three to five years, may God give us property. We were surprised. We hadn't thought of this.

[12 : 03] We set three members aside, laymen and women, Sharice Barr, Vince Scaletta, Kelly Wigman. We set aside \$10,000, which was probably more than we had anyway.

And we said, here's 10 grand. Go figure out where you think God might have us meet if that would indeed be the case. And they did. They came back and reported to us, I will never forget it, on November, on July 17th of 2018, and they had spoken with Pastor Davis of this congregation.

I said, how's it work from here? They said, well, you're going to have to go talk to Pastor Davis. Now, many of you have met Pastor Davis. We had him here speaking when we first opened up the building.

And I came and met Pastor Davis. I remember walking through that door. Panels up here, not even there. Plaster crumbling everywhere. Water falling from the back. Meeting him in his office.

I remember sitting in a couch with water buckets between his desk and mine. And a shower of water coming down. And I said, some people in our church have spoken with you about the possibility of the use of your building.

[13 : 20] What are your plans? What are you thinking? He said, well, I don't want to sell it. I said, I understand. We don't want to rent it. We've done this for 20 years.

And we departed amicably. We met a few more times along the way. It became obvious over two or three months that this idea of purchasing property was not something to take my time.

I went back to the elders and to that property committee and said, not now. There's no interest. Let me get back to the work. I'm tired of meetings about space.

And then on March 25th, I was going down to meet with Pastor Dennis downtown. And on March 25th of 2019, I stood on the train platform at 57th Street.

My phone buzzed. It was Pastor Davis. I still have the text. And he said, did you ever find space? I said, no. God knows what he's doing. How are you doing? He said, when can we get together?

[14 : 22] I said, I'm in town for the next couple of weeks. He said, how about today at 5? I came back at 5 o'clock and he said, we've made an executive decision.

We'd like to sell to you. We have a faith-based ministry. The university, of course, is increasingly interested in Woodlawn. Realtors are thinking of displacing people all throughout Woodlawn.

We'd like to see a faith-based community actually renovate and use the space. Would you like to buy the building? And I said, well, how much are you thinking? He said, 1.8 million.

I thought of the \$10,000 that we had. I said, well, when our people looked at the building, they thought it was worth more like a million or 1.1.

He said, 1.8 million. I said, when do you need to know? He goes, I need to know within 7 to 10 days. And if not, then we will move forward with other plans.

[15 : 23] We prayed. I left. I called the elders. They came to my house that very evening. I said, do any of you have 1.8 million? These are guys that have walked together for 20 years.

I knew they didn't have it because they'd already given everything they had. Lives and otherwise. We prayed. And this gets to Pastor Dennis' prayer on how God works in a moment.

Remember now, this is March 25th. We sent out a few emails to people that had watched our work over the years prayerfully.

And on April 1st, one week later, we had \$2.5 million committed to the project. By April 15th, a contract was signed.

By May 17th of 2019, we closed 47 days from front to back. It was as if I saw Jesus, who had been sitting at the right hand of the Father for some 20-some years, stand up and say, now you and you and you and you and you and this and go.

[16 : 56] There was no other way to explain it. I know. Believe me. I've got my own sand ballots and Tobias's as we've been on the wall.

People that have said, this isn't of God. This is of your own endeavors. And if God were to do something here, this isn't what he'd do. They're out there. They still try to undermine what the Lord has done. But I'm here to testify that this is impossible without God.

Impossible. So look back.

Give God his due. We have seen God fight for us. He captured this space for his own glory.

Let me give you another story. The funding of the renovation.

[18 : 02] We were scheduled to go to our little congregation. Mind you now, we only had about 130 members. And we were scheduled to take an offering for their pledges on March 13th, 2020.

Now, do you remember March 13th, 2020? We couldn't even meet. We had had children saving in paper piggy banks with bricks on them for months.

We had had adults prayerfully determining what they could give. The day came and we couldn't give. And so we met as a leadership.

And I said, do you feel God is telling us to wait? Do we not go forward? Believe me, there were building programs that I was aware of all over the country where resources were rich, where they would say we were going to at that point do something and we decided to wait.

But these crazy leaders of this church said, no, God has seen us fit to this point. We're going to go anyway. And so we scheduled about three weeks later an opportunity for people to come in and give their pledge.

[19 : 12] Remember, the city had shut down. You could put no more than 10 people in here at a time, even though it seated hundreds and hundreds. And we put black tape. You go out the front today and look on the sidewalk.

Some of it is still there. Every six feet, black tape, where people could come, line up, wearing their masks. And here's what we saw. We stood here, looked out the window, and it was a torrential downpour.

And there were the people. Umbrellas. Some of them know umbrellas.

Little children waiting every six feet down to the corner and around down the end of the building until they could come in the front door, lay down a pledge, walk this concrete aisle, take the Lord's Supper, and leave through a different exit.

And at that moment, a little one in our congregation arrives finally inside, soaking wet, her paper piggy bank falling apart, as it were.

[20 : 26] She sets it down on the table, soaking wet, and looks at one of our elders and says, there's a lot of money in there. To which she said, I'm so glad.

Thank you for giving that to the Lord. She said, there's \$2 in there. And that is the moment I knew God was going to do something.

Give God his due. We have seen God fight for us. The text says, not only has he fought for you, verse 3, past tense, but it speaks in a way that he is fighting for you, present tense, and he will fight for you into the future.

Look at verse 9. For the Lord has driven out before you great and strong nations, and for you no man has been able to stand before you to this very day. One man of you puts to flight a thousand, since it is the Lord your God who fights for you, present tense, just as he promised you.

And notice what it says in verse 5. The Lord your God will push them back before you. He will in the future drive out the remaining work that needs to be done, for there are other promises that he has given to you.

[21 : 56] And as I stand here today, calling you to look back and give God his due, I want to remind you that he's still at work today, and he will fulfill all of the things he has planned for this, long after you and I are gone from the scene.

He will. He will. He will. He will. He's going to do what he wants to do.

He will retire the debt on this thing. He gave it to you without a mortgage. He will pay it off. He will.

He will establish a gospel work from this corner to go to the far reaches of the world, situated as it is next to a world-class university. He will. He will integrate on the power of the gospel, a multi-ethnic work here, given that it's the front door to Chicago's south side, where we see all of our rich history and its African-American legacy.

He will. He will because I know that he has done things and does things and intends to do things for his own glory.

[23 : 17] So he will. Our God is the God who was and is. Come on.

Do you not know the end of that? Our God is the God who was and is and is to come. Past, present, future.

Therefore, you ought to have a confident sense about your step. Not because you have strength or I have strength or we have strength or you have resources, but he accomplishes what he wants.

I want to say that to the future men and women that sit here before me today, into whose hands this church will one day come.

Future leaders need to be reminded of the present pressures that when time mounts will hold them fast. So having seen God fight for us, let me just say a couple of words on what God should get from us.

[24 : 29] The text says loyalty and love. Look at loyalty. There's the therefore in verse six.

Therefore, be very strong to keep and do all that is written in the book of the law of Moses, turning aside from it, neither to the right hand, to the left or the left. Loyalty in particular to his word.

You're not to turn from the right or the left. You're to be loyal to his word. From all that you can properly understand of God's voice in the scriptures, you are to remain loyal.

You're to pledge your allegiance to the revelation of God as you understand it in a scripture rated text. After all, did he not keep his word to you?

So you keep his word. In fact, what it says there is you are to cling to it. Did you notice that in verse eight? But you shall cling to the Lord your God as you have done to this day.

[25 : 47] The word there is actually used in the very opening chapters of the scriptures when the man meets the woman. And it says he is the man is to be one flesh to the woman and he is to hold fast to her.

He's to leave his father or mother and hold fast to his wife. There are two that are to become one, to cling as to adhere to. Think of all the things that have taken place in this building where some adhesive has been put down in order that two things might be one thing.

Think of the people who came in and installed the beautiful seats in which you sit. They actually put something into the ground that attached the ground to the chair so that you could be there.

But it's that clinging to that keeps you. And he says, cling to the Lord's word. In other words, you're to be stuck to God's revelation.

In other words, to put it differently, as he flips the coin over there in the middle of the verse, you are not to mix with verse six and seven.

[26 : 52] You're stuck to his word, which requires being distinct from this world. That's why the church is supposed to be unique.

And whenever in any generation the church loses its power, it's because it has been complacent in clinging to the word by adhering itself to the world. That's what happens.

Now, I don't want you to mishear me on this, not mixing with the nations or even later in verse 11, where you don't turn back by clinging to them by making marriages.

You need to know that Joshua's concern is not so much ethnic as it is here iniquity. God doesn't mind if you marry someone from another ethnic race.

That's not his concern here. What his concern is with the nations is the iniquity of the nations, not the ethnicity of the nations. And the marriage actually concerns those who are not exclusively loyal to the God that you serve in the Lord Jesus Christ.

[28 : 00] This is the way Paul takes it in the Corinthian correspondence when he says, don't you know that things aren't supposed to mix with other things? He's not talking about marriage at that moment. He's talking about the Corinthian church who had left his teaching on Christ and adopted the teaching and fellowship of the false teachers.

That was a marriage not made in heaven, says Paul. And so the return to God was a return to the word and the Lord. And that's what's going on here.

Israel was to exclusively find itself being the Lord's people. He doesn't want a watering down of the message of the scriptures in the minds and hearts of his people.

And it happens when you mix. I'm no scientist, chemist, whatever. But I'm smart enough to know that sometimes I read a bottle and it says, make sure the surface you apply this to is dry before putting it down.

So you dry it. There's a little there's a little black strip out here because people were falling off that little step. And I went to the store and I bought this little black strip and I use my scissors and cut it.

[29 : 12] And I'm laying that strip out. And I remember looking at the thing and it says, make sure the surface is dry. And it said, scuff it up if it's been finished a little bit. Josh Dortsbach wasn't here, so I didn't have to worry about it.

But I took a little piece of sandpaper and I just kind of scuffed a quarter inch line all the way across. And when I got that thing scuffed out, I went ahead and I dried it. Why? Because if it was wet, what I put down was not going to hold.

So what happens is here with the surfaces, wet things don't adhere. Let me put it to you this way. You lose your contact with God's word. You come loose from his ways.

And you're going to roll up like a little piece of black tape. And you're going to stumble and you're going to fall. And that's what he's arguing for here. The old man Joshua in this last word to future leaders.

But loyalty is not all. There's another therefore. Did you notice it in the text? Verse 11. Be very careful, therefore. That's the second time around.

[30 : 18] Not only to be loyal to God by your stickiness to his word, but you're to be therefore very careful to love the Lord your God.

Loyalty and love. Having seen God fight for us, he should get loyalty and love from us. Let me put it as clearly as I can.

God wants you to love him. He wants love. And again, it's not like the religions we make where we do loving things and we become loyal to things and hope that God will somehow be gracious to us.

Notice in the text. Notice in the text. God is the one who is loyal. God is the one who is loving. Therefore, it's the response of the person to give loyalty and love to God.

Christianity is by nature a religion of remembrance. We remember what he did. And it evokes within us a response of loyalty and love.

[31 : 24] It's important to note that. Because some of you might be saying, Pastor, I'm glad to be here on this day. But there's an inherent weakness in your argument.

I've been following you today. I'm looking at the text for myself. But why should I do what Israel did? Why should I be loyal to God as they were loyal? Why should I love God?

Because I see the promises he made to them here and the fulfillment of it. But what has he done for me lately? Right? I mean, don't we often feel this way?

He gave them land. Glad to know he gave Christ Church a piece of property. But what am I to say he's given to me? I've walked into church today.

I've heard all your stories. But there's nothing that I can readily lay my eyes on in terms of what I would honestly say God was fighting for me. In fact, it feels as though he hasn't been fighting for me.

[32 : 21] That's a good and important question. It desires and demands an answer. You need to know this in shorthand form. The land that was fulfilled to Israel signified a divine promise of a restored relationship with God fundamentally.

It went back to Abraham and Adam before that. Adam lost the land, meaning he lost fellowship with God. Abraham was going to get some land like walking into a new Eden when he could again live with God.

God was going to condescend to earth and have a space that was his own with his own people. In other words, it wasn't really about land.

It was about God's desire to lovingly be in fellowship with Israel and through Israel, the world. So the writer to the Hebrews says, well, Joshua gave you a rest, but not really the kind of rest that was just emblematic of a new fellowship that you would have.

And so then the question is, what has God done for you? This is what he's done. The New Testament says that Joshua's work pointed to a greater work that had been seen.

[33 : 34] Rest and relationship can be had with God as a result of how Christ fought for you. Now, you say Christ fought for me?

Yes, that's what the scriptures say. And he fought for you, particularly in his obedience to God's word, his loyalty to it, which was unquestioned and no one else could have it.

And he fought it in regard to his love of God because he loved God supremely every second of every day, although we weren't able to do it. So when he goes to the cross, he's not dying for his own disloyalty to the word.

He's not dying for his own lack of love for God. He came in love of God and you, loyalty to God and to you. And he pledged himself with his death, perfect in substitution, perfect so that God would look upon him and go, my word, how you have loved me.

My goodness, how you are loyal to me. And Jesus says, and would you please bring into your eternal rest anyone who wants to hang on my coattails? In other words, you get what God's work has done through faith at this time, sight later.

[34 : 45] Now you say, but I would believe it if I saw it. I know you. I'm asking you to trust words that are read in the scriptures rather than by being present there in person.

But do you really think Jesus would have to show up every generation, every generation, so that you could be proven that he loved you? Can you not take it that he did come once, did die once for salvation of all people?

Let me put it to you in the terms of construction. Let me put it to you in the terms of work orders. All the changes that were made in this place, and there were a number along the way, that I am sure. No change actually takes place unless the worker reads it in black and white.

They don't want to just see someone say to them something. No, I want it in writing. That's what's happening here. If it isn't written down, things don't get executed, and so too it is in the Bible.

Jesus fought for you. I'm here to remind you of that, and it's there in black and white. It's right here. You either see it or you don't.

[35 : 52] I sat with one of our elders, Andy Hensel, years ago with Dick Lucas at a downtown restaurant. Andy wanted his friend to come to know Jesus. He said, come talk to me. Dick Lucas is a businessman's man.

We sat down at the lunch. Did we not? Andy was praying for this meeting, wanting the man to come to Christ. We thought Dick Lucas would do all the heavy lifting. And so Dick Lucas finally turns to him and says, have you ever read the gospel?

He goes, no, I'm not actually interested in reading the gospel. But would you read the gospel with Andy if he wanted to read it to you? He said, no, I don't think I'd be interested at this time. And Dick Lucas looked across the table and said, pass the ketchup, please.

He was done. He told us the ball has to come to the bat. The man was not ready to see with his own eyes the way that Christ had fought for him.

And if you're not ready to see it with your own eyes here, don't think you're going to see it if he walked in the door tonight. You got enough to give God his due.

[36 : 56] Well, Joshua was about done. I should be about done because I know you're looking forward to the luncheon. So let's bring this together. He goes on as he begins to get out of the pulpit in verses 14 and 15. And the narrator reminds us, well, I'm about to go the way of all the earth.

In other words, I'm laying this thing down. It's going to the next generation. But I want you to know that none of the promises of God have failed. No, interesting, Lil.

The text didn't end there. Don't you kind of think it should end right at 14? Isn't that just climactic? I mean, why doesn't it end at 14? Well, probably because Joshua was an old man and they always got something to say on their way out of the pulpit.

And I can hear him there. When he gets to verse 15, that's kind of this thing like, well, let me just say one last thing before I take my seat. Let me throw down one last stinger on our way to lunch.

If Israel won't give God his due, if you won't give God his due, then God will turn and fight against you.

[38 : 06] Well, let my final word on this happiest of days be this. If the people who inhabit this space for the next 50 years and more should ever abandon giving God his due through their expressed loyalty to his word and their love.

Then know this. God, in a moment, can unwind all that he has done.

And in the spirit of Joshua, if I have anything to say about it, even after I go the way of all the earth. I who bear witness to what we have seen God do, I will roll over in my grave on you.

And I'm not going to be alone. For our generation did not give ourselves to the cost of what we celebrate today, only to have some later generation squander that which had been given to them.

Give God his due. Give God his due. Add your loyal and loving voice to the choir, which raises the chant, crown him with many crowns.

[39 : 42] Our Heavenly Father, as we celebrate this day, we want to sing to you again. And we're already eager to raise our voices again this afternoon. But Lord, we have seen you fight for us.

May you get from us our loyalty and love and in spirit and in truth. May we with one voice crown him Lord of all.

In Christ's name.