

## THANKSGIVING EVE 2004

*THANKFULNESS IN THE IN BETWEEN*

JOSHUA 4:1-24

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As I was thinking about Thanksgiving, I stopped to think about the situation surrounding the initiation of this holiday. I was struck at how differently the Pilgrims approached life than do we moderns. They approached life more like the biblical characters. In particular, the Pilgrims and the persons of the Bible knew the importance of fully living and giving thanks in the “in betweens” of life.

By that I mean we are often in a hurry to get from one place to another. Our thanks and praise to God are usually for leaving something in the past or arriving at some place in the future. For example, I may thank God for recovering from an illness or I may thank God for getting a promotion. But seldom do we thank God for the transitional period, the period “in between.”

Let me give you an example of how we sometimes learn to embrace the “in between.” We are often so focused on the end result that we miss the blessings God has for us in the transition period. A couple of weeks ago I told you about the events that led up to me leaving that church that was so tough. But tonight I would like to tell you about the reception they had for me; well not exactly the reception, but the bulletin announcement. They had taken up a collection to give me a memento of my tenure at the church. Only the bulletin announcement read, “Pastor John is leaving the church this week. We will be having a farewell dinner for him this Wednesday evening. Will you please send in a small donation? The congregation wants to give him a little momentum.”

I’m not sure whether that was an intentional or unintentional slip. However, what I would like us to think about this evening is learning to be thankful during the “in between” periods of life and to mark them with permanent reminders.

**SINCE MOST OF LIFE IS LIVED IN THE “IN BETWEEN” PERIODS WE MUST LEARN TO EMBRACE THEM WITH ENTHUSIASM.** Let’s take the Pilgrims first. Thanksgiving is really a celebration of the “in between.” Yes, they had safely made the dangerous transatlantic journey from England, but they were not fully settled in the New Land. In fact, they probably didn’t even know what awaited them. They had left religious persecution behind, but they had not yet established fully functional colonies yet. However, they were thankful for where they were. There was a lot of work to be done and realizing their dream of living free had not yet been totally realized. In fact, the United States of America would not come into existence until much later. Yet, they were thankful. The memorial to their thankfulness remains with us today in the holiday of Thanksgiving.

In the passage we read this evening, Joshua and the Israelites are truly in the “in between” period. They had left the slavery of Egypt behind them over forty years ago, and they had been wandering around the desert for forty years. Their wilderness experience was behind them, yet they had not reached their final destination of inheriting the land. They had many battles ahead of them and many hard years.

Joshua was Moses’ successor and he saw the trouble the Hebrew nation gave Moses the whole time. God would deliver them and they would rejoice. They would worship God and praise Moses for his leadership. But then when things got a little difficult, they would complain about God and threaten to lynch Moses.

So here is the plan God gives Joshua. First, God knows they are focused on the land flowing with milk and honey but He doesn’t want them to miss anything. They could have found plenty of places to cross the Jordan River, but God chose a place that was too deep and too treacherous to cross on their own. God gave them a miracle. He stopped the flow of the river and the entire nation crossed the Jordan River on dry land. But knowing their nature and ours, the Hebrews would quickly forget this and want to inherit their houses and wealth. They wanted to get on with life. So God instructed Joshua to have one designated person from each of the twelve tribes pick up a stone from the middle of the dry riverbed, carry it on their back to the other side, and pile up the twelve boulders and form them into a memorial. Joshua also piled up twelve

stones in the middle of the Jordan River as well. One memorial would be visible; the other would be invisible when the Jordan started flowing again. The only time the memorial in the middle of the Jordan could be seen would be when there were draught conditions and the river was low. The other would be visible at all times.

For Christians, we live constantly in the great “in between.” Jesus came to die for our sins and to set us free. Yet we must constantly fight on until that day when He comes back to destroy evil once and for all. So we constantly live in the “already” but “not yet.” Some day we will be perfect. Some day we will no longer have to fight against sin. Some day we will simply live with Him and worship Him unhindered. But until that time, we live by faith, hope, and love.

So our most basic way of living as believers is in the “in between” state. But I want us to break that down even further.

We say things like, “When I graduate I will ... When I get married I will ... When I get this new job ... or buy this new house ... or get over this time of sadness or grieving, I will .... Do you see what happens? We miss the biggest portion of life. We miss the blessings of being in school. We miss the blessings of the job we are presently in. We miss the blessings of the house God has provided for us. We miss the work God is doing in us during difficult times. If we are believers, then we are truly pilgrims in the spiritual sense. God is always moving us from one place to another. We must be careful to not miss the blessings of God’s presence and provision at all times. **SINCE MOST OF LIFE IS LIVED IN THE “IN BETWEEN” PERIODS WE MUST LEARN TO EMBRACE THEM WITH ENTHUSIASM.**

When we graduate from school we usually get a diploma that serves as a memorial of our time. We frame them, we put them on our walls, we display them, or we go the opposite route and hide them in a drawer. The problem with both approaches is that we often focus on our own blood, sweat and tears. It is as if the graduation were our accomplishment. **WHAT WE MUST LEARN TO CELEBRATE IN THE “IN BETWEEN” IS THE PRESENCE AND THE PROVISION OF GOD.** In other words, the purpose of the “in between” is to learn to depend on God, trust God, be conformed to the people God wants us to be, and to love God. This should cause us to live in continual thankfulness.

There was no doubt in the Pilgrims’ minds that it was God Who safely brought them across the Atlantic. It was God Who provided them with food and water in the new land. It was God Who predisposed the Native Americans to be kind and helpful to them.

There was no doubt in the Israelites’ minds how they entered the Promised Land. God had the priests carry the Ark of the Covenant before the people. When the feet of the priests who were carrying the Ark entered the river, the flow stopped and the river dried up. The priests remained in the riverbed until the entire nation of Israel crossed over safely. Once on the other side, the soldiers led the people and got them ready for battle. However, the priests and the Ark of God entered the Jordan River first, remained there until the entire nation crossed safely, including the warriors, and exited the river last. It was God Who went before them, and God Who protected them from the back. It was God before and behind. There was no doubt Who was responsible for their safe transition and it would be God Who guaranteed their future success.

For us as believers, we must remember that without Jesus, we can do nothing. We must also learn to trust that God will finish the good work He has started in us. And most of all, we must remember that nothing in this life -- not sickness, not poverty, not persecution, nothing in this world, not even death, and nothing in the next world, not demons, not Satan himself -- can ever separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. When we are in the “in between” God is with us and God is perfecting us. Let’s take grief for example. We are always in a hurry to get over the grief. Instead we should ask questions like, “How is God changing me here? What is He now doing in my life? How is preparing me for my next stage of life?” Do you see how those questions embrace the “in between?” The important thing is always that God is with me, God is providing for me, and God is working in me. **WHAT WE MUST LEARN TO CELEBRATE IN THE “IN BETWEEN” IS THE PRESENCE AND THE PROVISION OF GOD.**

Actually, the “in between” times in life are the most precious if we choose to embrace them because when we finally arrive at some intermediate destination, we often forget God. We get all caught up in our new job, our new home, our new relationship, our newfound health, and we forget about God. **MEMORIALS ARE MEANT TO REMIND US OF THE FAITHFULNESS AND LOVE OF GOD. THEY ARE ALSO MEANT TO BE EVANGELISTIC MESSAGES TO OTHERS.** Did you ever think of this? If you were to tell the story of God’s faithfulness to believers, it would be a testimony. If we tell that same story to unbelievers, it is an evangelistic witness. Either way, we need to continue to tell the stories of God’s work in our lives. We don’t do that much, do we? I’ve been your pastor here for 14 years. During that time I have not encouraged people to get up and give testimonies. That is very sad because it seems to me God wants us to tell these stories.

In the Joshua passage, God instructed Joshua and the people to build these memorials as occasions to tell stories of God’s faithfulness. Listen to what God says to the Israelites through Joshua,

*“In the future, your children will ask, ‘What do these stones mean?’ Then you can tell them ‘this is where the Israelites crossed the Jordan on dry ground.’ For the LORD your God dried up the river right before your eyes, and He kept it dry until you were all across, just as He did at the Red Sea when He dried it up until we had all crossed over. He did this so that all the nations of the earth might know the power of the LORD, and that you might fear the LORD you God forever” (Joshua 4:21b-24 NLT).*

Did you catch that? It was to be a testimony. It was to remind them not only of the fact that God miraculously brought them safely across the Jordan River, but God started this project way before when He miraculously brought the nation safely out of Egypt by parting the Red Sea. Not only would they be reminded that their mothers and fathers crossed the Red Sea safely, but that God destroyed the Egyptian Army in the Red Sea. As they were preparing to fight more enemies in taking the Promised Land, they needed to remember it was God Who brought Israel safely through the Red Sea on dry ground. It was God Who now brought Israel into the Promised Land through the Jordan River on dry ground. It was God Who destroyed the powerful Egyptian Army and it would be God Who destroy the enemies in the Promised Land. It was important to tell these stories.

They were to use the occasion of this memorial to teach their children about God. They were to make sure their children knew Who God was and what He expected of them.

This memorial was to be a witness to unbelievers that they should know the God we serve is the One and Only True and Living God. There is no other.

As Christians, we are to live lives that are living testimonies of Who God is. The Bible says that we are living stones. We are God’s living memorials. We are God’s living testimonies to one another and witnesses to unbelievers.

Even though I am a truly thankful person, I have to say that I am terribly negligent at being this living memorial. Rarely do I give personal testimonies, rarely do we give public testimonies here at church, and even more rarely do I witness to unbelievers by telling them what God is doing in my life. I certainly want to change that.

We are really fortunate to live in the United States where we already have a national day that can serve as a memorial for us. Thanksgiving is a time in which we are to recount the blessings of God. It is a great opportunity to share with one another our testimony. And by testimony, I don’t mean going way back 40 years to when we were saved. God is working in our lives now. We should be able to share the wonderful “in between” experiences we are having with God. And think about this. This is a holiday that provides a very natural witnessing opportunity for us to share our faith with unbelievers as we can tell them what we are truly thankful for.

I can't speak for all of you but I can tell you that I have lost the art of telling stories about what God had done, is doing, and will do in my life. Let's not waste another storyless Thanksgiving. **MEMORIALS ARE MEANT TO REMIND US OF THE FAITHFULNESS AND LOVE OF GOD. THEY ARE ALSO MEANT TO BE EVANGELISTIC MESSAGES TO OTHERS.**

I really want us to understand how important memorials, testimonies, witnesses are. The best memorials are those that recount the faithfulness of God in the past, embraces fully the present "in between," and lives in hope and anticipation for the future. Listen to the story of a lady who understood what it meant to be a living testimony.

A young woman had been diagnosed with terminal cancer. She called her pastor so she could plan her funeral service with him. After going over the service, picking out the songs and Scripture readings, the woman said excitedly, "There's just one more thing! I want to be buried with a fork in my hand! This is the most important thing!"

The pastor was confused and just looked at the woman. She continued, "When I was young, my grandmother would take me to socials and formal dinners. When the dishes of the main course were being cleared away, she would inevitably lean over to me and say, 'Keep your fork.' It was my favorite part because I knew that something even better was coming like velvety chocolate cake or deep-dish apple pie. Something wonderful and with substance! So I just want people to see me there in that casket with a fork in my hand and I want them to wonder, 'What's with the fork?' Then I want you to tell them, 'Keep your forks, the best are yet to come.'"

The pastor's eyes welled up with tears. He hugged the woman and left. Even though that was the last time he saw her alive, he knew that she had a better grasp of life, death, and hope than he did. She remembered the past, embraced the present, and anticipated the future.

At the funeral people were walking by the young woman's casket and saw the fork. Sure enough, over and over again, the pastor heard people asking one another, 'What's with the fork,' and over and over again, the pastor smiled."

This woman was a living testimony to God in life and in death. Joshua piled up those stones as a constant reminder of God's love and faithfulness to Israel. Jesus has made us living stones as a living memorial of His love and faithfulness to a lost and broken world. Let us be living, breathing testimonies.

## **BENEDICTION**

*"And now God is building you, as living stones, into his spiritual temple. What's more, you are God's holy priests, who offer the spiritual sacrifices that please him because of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 2:5 NLT).*