

It was the final round of speeches for my summer college course on the fundamentals of public speaking. The most difficult speech to give – a speech to motivate – is saved for this last round. First the student needs to persuade their audience to agree with a conclusion... which often turns out to be on a controversial topic... “The legalization of marijuana” being the most popular... and then they must try to influence us to take a specific action... having been won over by their logic. I usually hear appeals to recycle... to boycott fast foods... become a vegan... save the whales and/or dolphins... vote yes to legalize pot... or to donate money to causes such as animal rights groups... and environmental organizations. ... But a week ago this past Thursday... Trevor (not his real name) took on an unusual sense of bravado... and came... (as I am sure he was thinking)... loaded for bear.

I never hide the fact that I am a full-time pastor... as well as their part-time college professor. And this may... or may not have swayed Trevor to make an attempt to persuade his classroom audience that Christianity is an invention of man... and that we all need to be willing to confess that we don't know what we proclaim is truth.

He began his speech telling us... *“Everyone in this room is afraid of dying...”* I wrote on his feedback sheet, *“You assume something to be true, that you do not know. Trevor, I am not afraid to die...”* ... As I made my notes... he continued with his speech... He tried to use this unestablished assumption as proof. *“Because man has always feared death, he invented religion...”* That was his initial evidence for Christianity being invented by man. He followed it with more assumption... only this time... he didn't mention what he clearly assumed. His further “evidence” was a reciting of

Biblical events that are supernatural. Mockingly, he spoke of a snake that spoke in the Garden, and other events which he saw as beyond rational thinking. And then he asked us to be as open-minded as he is... and be willing to admit that we don't really know... concerning the Bible's truths that we proclaim.

I graded Trevor's speech on his mechanics... all of the "be-sure-to-do's" and "make-sure-you-don't's" ... that I had been teaching the class all term. Trevor didn't pay attention to many of those instructions and warnings. For example... he kept his eyes on his paper and read it all without looking up... he wore a hat that covered his eyes... he showed no evidence of any research by not citing a single outside source... but only offered his own opinion and thoughts... .. And he committed several other faux pas... of speech mechanics... that I often warn students not to do. But this gave me opportunity to give Trevor a lot of grace. (He had been to class every day with a great attitude... and always turned his assignments in... on-time.) So I did not deduct all the points... that I clearly said would be the result if any student ignored all of my "be-sure-to-do's" and "make-sure-you-don't's" ... in their speech. And later I went home and typed out a note explaining that he received a lot of grace... and where he was logically inconsistent and conjectured through unarticulated assumption. ... In part I wrote...

You spoke of the ridiculousness of the miracles that the Bible proclaims. The assumption you made (but failed to acknowledge) is "God does not exist." If God doesn't exist, all of your arguments would make sense. Supernatural events like walking on water and turning sticks into snakes would, indeed, be absurd. But if God does exist, then it is NOT absurd to think that He is able to temporarily suspend the laws of the nature that He created. Take away your non-vocalized assumption, and your argument falls apart.

You assumed to know something, built the body of your speech on it as though it is established fact, and then very ironically told us not to be afraid to admit “we don’t know.”

That is often how the world views miracles. They start with an assumption... and they either hide it... or... in many cases... I am sure they don't even know they are making it. ... And then... ironically... they tell us that we need to be open-minded.

We have been studying the Book of Joshua... here on Sunday mornings... and this morning we will conclude this Old Testament book that is filled with record after record... that the world thinks we are crazy for accepting as true. ... And we **would** be crazy... if we shared the unannounced assumption they seem to make... that God does not exist. If there is no God that can temporarily suspend the Laws of Nature – which if there was a God... He would have created – If there is no such God... then yes... we are crazy to believe this stuff. But what if He does exist...? What if the premise that they assume to be true and present as established fact... is wrong...? IF God does indeed exist... then... the parting of the Jordan River... the crumbling walls of Jericho... the sun that stands still... and each of the miracles of the Bible... all make perfect sense.

A God that chose... and has interacted... with miracles... on behalf of His people... is the subject of Joshua's final speech... and the close of the Book which is named after him. Joshua gives the people a brief review of Israel's history from Abraham up to the time of the conquering of Canaan. He journals some of the great things God had done for the Nation... He wants to elicit their gratitude... and then challenges them to serve God.

Is this what motivates you to serve the Lord...? Does your service come from a heart that is truly grateful...? ... Do you ever take the time to stop and consider the clear evidences of the Lord working on your behalf...? Making this effort every Sunday before we begin our corporate worship... I guarantee would radically transform our worship services. Can you imagine the difference it would make... if we all made the effort to prepare our hearts for worship... during the prelude... before church...? Maybe we can save much of our visiting for after the service is over. Wouldn't God be greatly honored if we made diligent effort to ponder the indications we had observed – that week - of Him at work... in... and around our life...?

Someone might be thinking... *“Well... I don't get to see my friends until I come to church... This is the time that get to enjoy visiting with them and catching up...”* Great! Have a wonderful time of fellowship with them before coming into the sanctuary and sitting down. Do the majority of it... then. ... And visit with them afterward. But let me challenge you with this: “make the worship service more about the Lord... than yourself... and see what He will do for honoring Him...” My guess is that those relationships you seek to build... will deepen significantly. My guess is that God will give you opportunity for those conversations - at other times. ... So come into the sanctuary... quietly reflect on what God has been doing... cultivate and nurture gratitude in your heart... and then worship together with the other believers.

“Pastor...? Do you want us to be legalistic...? I came out of a church that was all about rules... and no talking during the prelude was one of them...”
...Nope! Honestly... I am not expecting that there would ever be “dead silence” in here before the service... and I am not interested in making a

rule for us to judge one another according to how it is obeyed. ... I am simply putting forth an application from our passage today... which I believe will honor the Lord and bring vitality to your personal worship... and service to Him. Lay aside any legalism. (Don't do this for the approval of others...) Do it only as a personal decision... because you want to raise the spiritual dynamic of your worship and service.

Joshua wanted to elevate the spiritual vitality in Israel... because of a spiritual lethargy... (a spiritual sluggishness... if you will)... that he observed settling upon the people of God. He sought to do this... first... by rehearsing what God had been doing.

Joshua 24:1-13

Verse one says that Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem. Shechem was the ideal location for this moving farewell address... and review of God's activity... by Israel's great leader. ... It was at Shechem (about 500 years prior to this) that God promised Abraham that his descendants would inherit Canaan... which they were now in (Gen. 12:6-7). It was also Shechem where Jacob built an altar... when he returned to Canaan... after hiding from his brother Esau... (33:20). ... And more recently... Shechem was the place where the people of Israel had reaffirmed their commitment to the Lord when they first entered it (Josh. 8:30-35). Shechem was indeed "holy ground" to the Israelites.

Coming to a recognized place that is "holy ground" serves a good purpose... in reflecting on the Lord's activities. That is why I have asked you to consider using this sanctuary on Sunday mornings to do this. Perhaps you have reaffirmed your commitment to the Lord in this very

place. Perhaps God has spoken to you in this very room. It isn't that there is a certain magic about this place... but it is a place that has been dedicated for God's people to do business with Him. The people of Israel came to Shechem and presented themselves before God... (verse 1 says...) and that is exactly what we seek to do every week in this place.

Before looking closer at Joshua's history of God's actions... I'd like for you to make special note of something. ... We might easily miss the fact that this is a history that should never have happened. ... Joshua selects events from their history that demonstrate... how undeserving Israel was. Only the grace and power of Yahweh can explain... why there even was the nation Israel to stand at Shechem and listen to Joshua.

Joshua 24:2

This reveals something that we didn't know before... (although we might have suspected it.) ... When God called Abraham from Ur of the Chaldees... Abraham was an idol worshipper... and so was his father... Terah. ... They didn't know Yehweh... ... We are told here... that they served other gods.

Abraham did not seek after God and discover Him... It was God Who came after Abraham! It is so important for us to understand this!

Deuteronomy 32:10 (ESV)

"He found him in a desert land, and in the howling waste of the wilderness; he encircled him, he cared for him, he kept him as the apple of his eye.

This is very much the same thing Jesus said to His disciples... and then the Apostle Paul re-states...

John 15:16 (ESV)

You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you.

Ephesians 1:4 (ESV)

even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him.

So here is something to focus on every Sunday to prepare your heart for worship. Come into the sanctuary and focus on the truth that you are God's elect. And it was God Who came after you! ... Hymn writer... John Newton... got it right! Grace really is amazing! ... It is completely God's doing that you are here. ... It was not a matter that you only needed a little help from God... You are here only because of the unexpected... unimaginable... unexplainable grace that God showed us all. This fact... when rightly understood keeps us humble... grateful... and willing to obey. It is a great thing to fix our minds on... before corporate worship begins.

Joshua 24:3-4a

We don't live long as a new believer before we experience the gradual pace of God. ... Speaking about Abraham... Joshua continues as the voice of Yahweh. (Please look at the second part of verse 3... "*and made his offspring many. I gave him Isaac.*" ... Those two statements look ludicrous together. God multiplies Abraham's family... He gives him Isaac. (Now... math was never my strong-suit... but if I remember this right... one multiplied by one is one. ... That is not what I call "many"! And... according to the narrative in Genesis... it took **twenty-five years** to get Isaac... after he was promised!

So then... we read the first part of verse 4... *“And to Isaac I gave Jacob and Esau...”* ... OK... two more... But that’s not much better. It does not yet fulfil my understanding of *“many.”* And... according to the record in Genesis... these two boys came along after **twenty years** of childlessness for Isaac and Rebekah (Gen. 25:19-26).

Let me state the obvious! God does not appear to be in a hurry... He is not driven by the calendar... or intimidated by the clock. Yahweh did multiply Abraham’s seed but he did it slowly. He does what He promises... but sometimes so gradually... that we don’t see His faithfulness. ... This is frequently God’s way — to be ‘faithful in little’ and even little by little.

So... let me give another suggestion for your heart preparation for worship on Sunday mornings. ... Fasten your eyes more on the fact ... than the degree of God’s faithfulness... or its speed. ... Ask Him to give you eyes to see the small movements... that have a wide trajectory for the future. ... We easily lose sight of what Yahweh has done by demanding to see it all at once... and right now!

Joshua 4b...

As a new believer... it doesn’t take very long for us to notice the gradual pace of God... and as a new believer... it doesn’t take long... before we begin to encounter the mysterious ways of God. Look at God’s ways that are expressed in this verse. ... *“I gave Esau the hill country of Seir to possess, but Jacob and his children went down to Egypt...”*

Say what...?! ... Jacob and his descendants inherit the blessing of Abraham. Jacob and his family will continue the line of God’s chosen

people. ... Esau sold his birthright... showing that he couldn't care less about God's promise to Abraham and Isaac. ... Esau wasn't excited about it. His faith was not in that. But Jacob had full faith in God's promises.

Esau got an immediate inheritance... a nice one. But the covenant family... the people of God... instead of receiving their inheritance... they are sent to Egypt... where they will be enslaved for 400 years! ... Why do God's chosen people experience hardship and slavery while others have their reward? Why do God's chosen ones experience the affliction while others enjoy their good things? ... See how Scripture recognizes this mystery... that God's people so often have to wait... in great distress for God's promised blessing?

That is what God does for a people who believe. ... AND He does not hide the fact that this is what He does. ... Jesus said... you had better count the cost before you come and follow Me. There will be some strange hardship that you will have to face.

But all the while... he shows us that He is right there beside us... the whole time. "You never know the value of your anchor... until you are in a storm." ... God sometimes uses hardship to get us to depend on Him more completely. ... And sometimes we face hardship as His means for teaching us lessons on humility... His grace... His ability to rescue... His trustworthiness... and whole host of other schoolings.

If you are going through a particularly difficult time right now... prepare your heart for worship... by asking God to teach you all that He wants you to

learn from it. Thank Him for His ways... that include these mysterious hardships.

Joshua 24:5-7

It does us all good... as believers... to remember what it was like to be in bondage to sin... and then to rejoice in the redemption that was purchased so dearly for us on the cross. ... It's a dangerous thing to take the gift of salvation for granted.

The verses we just looked at are Exodus 14 in concentrate. ... Exodus 14 stresses the utter *helplessness* of Israel at the sea. ... In fact... it says that Yahweh Himself... placed them in that position of helplessness. He deliberately placed Israel as sitting ducks by the sea... They were hemmed in... and totally *helpless* as Egypt's military machines rolled in behind them.

Why does God operate that way? ... To show... that salvation is of the Lord... such overwhelming power comes from God... not from us. ... He does it this way... to insist that there is no place for human pride in the presence of God.

Jonah 2:9 (ESV)

... Salvation belongs to the LORD!"

1 Corinthians 1:29 (ESV)

...so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.

But... please don't misunderstand. ... God's purpose is not to deform us into blobs of limp jello... who only let go and let God. But rather... His purpose is to transform us into humble worshippers who gladly confess our *'help comes from Yahweh, maker of heaven and earth.'* ... So God will

sometimes box us up... in our own helplessness... in order to show us we are not delivered by our own cleverness... our own insight... or manipulation...or anxiety... .. but by Yahweh 'who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters' (Isa. 43:16).

Joshua 24:8-10

In Numbers chapter 23 and 24... we can read the account of how Balak had hired Balaam to come and curse the Israelites... as they advanced from Egypt toward the Promised Land. Balak had amassed all the brass, pomp, and regalia (and maybe several high-school bands) to hear Balaam's magic curse against Israel. But every attempt brought only Balaamic blessing.

Verse 10...

Joshua 24:10

So Joshua preaches to Israel... *'Remember the faithful protection of God; remember how he shielded you from Balaam's passion and Balak's purpose.'* ... The same appeal applies to God's people in our very own age. The Balaams and Balaks assume different guises... but the protection of God remains unchanging. ... But my knowledge and yours... tends to be fragmentary. ... If we knew what God has kept us from... and what He has kept from us... we would have no trouble confessing how faithful his protection has been.

Prepare your heart for worship. ... Thank Him for all the protections you cannot see. ... This idea of protection carries over in the next few verses.

Joshua 24:11-12

Like hornets that break-up a crowd... God allowed reports to come to Canaan about Israel's conquests. The reports frightened... scattered... and in some cases paralyzed the inhabitants of the Land. In Joshua chapter 2... Rahab told the spies that their hearts were melting in fear.

The major impression Israel is to receive from this section... is that the power is solely Yahweh's. ... Joshua makes the point skillfully at the end of verse 12... summing up the conquest west of the Jordan... *'it was not by your sword or by your bow'*. ... Don't begin to imagine that your own efforts achieved this. ... The praise belongs to Yahweh and His strong arm.

In the moments before the worship service begins... turn your thoughts toward any spiritual accomplishments you may have been part of... and acknowledge that the praise belongs to God... and His strong arm.

Joshua 24:13

Whenever the people of God start to take their blessings for granted... they began drifting away from sincere worship of the Lord. ... A grateful heart is a strong defense against spiritual sluggishness... and it spurs us on... to serve God with sincerity and faithfulness. ... What else could one do... toward a God Who calls... delivers... protects... and supplies...? There is a compulsion about it.

Joshua 24:14

In view of the fact of what God has done for Israel, Israel is obligated to do much for God. ... Service is to be genuine... real... honest... and upright.

Many are pretenders in this matter. ... That is unacceptable to God. ... Joshua made it clear that the people of Israel had to make a decision to serve the Lord God of Israel. There could be no neutrality.

We need to hear Joshua's challenge. ... Thankfully God periodically raises up men and women like Joshua... to stand before us and confront us: "Do you know who you are in relationship to God? ... Have you made a choice? If not... then choose right now... today... whom you're going to be sold out to." ... It's an imperative. ... Each of us needs to seriously hear it. ... What we're called to do is examine our own relationship with Jesus Christ.

Have you wholeheartedly made that choice... and are you absolutely convinced in the choice? ... Perhaps... if you're very honest with yourself... you'll say, *"I prayed a little prayer a long time ago. ... But since then I've come to church... but I cannot claim that I am a wholehearted follower of Christ. I know that I am not really sold-out... as He wants me to be... I get caught up with all the passing fancies of the world... What excites the average person in our culture all too easily becomes a passion with me... television shows that degrade my pure thought-life... music... clothes... fads..."*

Joshua 24:15

It's easy to slip into a quiet rebellion—going about life in your own way. But the time comes when you have to choose who or what will control you. The choice is yours. Will it be God, your own limited personality, or another imperfect substitute?

Much of Christianity in the United States is characterized by *worldliness, waywardness, willfulness, wandering, wastefulness, weakness, whimpering, worry, and wickedness* and can be traced to believers who have not made a *determined, decisive decision to dedicate* themselves to the Lord Jesus Christ and to serve Him *courageously, consistently, and continually*. The message of Joshua was given over 3400 years ago, but is still good for us today.

We must make a decision for the Lord... a decision to believe and follow Him wholeheartedly — a decision to serve the Lord... with all that we are... and have. ... But a decision has to be made. No allowance is granted for putting the decision off. ... God demands that a decision be made.

Joshua 24:16-18

The people responded with enthusiasm... moved by the force of Joshua's arguments and the magnetism of his example. ... They despised the very thought of forsaking the God who had delivered them out of Egypt... that land of slavery... protected them in the wilderness... and brought them into the land of promise. ... "*Perish the very thought that we might ever be guilty of such ingratitude,*" was their instant reply. ... They joined Joshua's chorus and promised that they too would serve the Lord.

But Joshua appeared to do a strange thing after Israel enthusiastically declared that they would serve Jehovah. He contested their declaration. But his contesting their declaration was merely a test for them to see if their decision was sincere. ... He was not at all satisfied with their burst of

enthusiasm. ... Did he detect some traces of insincerity in them...? Maybe... But Joshua goes on... to try and strengthen their resolve.

Joshua 24:19-20

Joshua appears to throw cold water on their wonderful enthusiasm... I think... because he understood that it is easy for people to promise obedience to the Lord... but it's something else to actually follow through. I think his stern words were perhaps an overstatement... and they were intended to curb the Israelites overconfidence. I think he was trying to make them look honestly at their own hearts. ... I see this as a warning against easy-believism and cheap grace. He's saying, "*Don't make this decision lightly. Understand what's involved.*"

We Jesus did the same thing when we read Luke 14. The Jesus bandwagon was rolling along with great enthusiasm... and then Jesus seems to throw cold water on everybody. ... "Do you really want to be My follower...? You will need to eat My flesh..."

The church today needs to take notice of this. Too frequently... the Jesus we present is some variety of prepackaged joy... peace... and provision that works twice as fast as aspirin. ... Often we are guilty of presenting a cellophane Christ. ... We make Him into a cosmic Santa Clause... meanwhile we glibly perjure ourselves... singing songs like "I surrender all" before a Holy Judge... Who will one day hold us accountable... We simply **must not** make our commitment easily... lightly... flippantly... casually... but cautiously and fearfully.

If you sense that you have been too casual... openly confess it to God... as you prepare your heart for worship.

Joshua's point was also to indicate that this is not about religious reformation. This is about spiritual transformation. ... When Joshua said, "*You can't do these things*"... the point is that God Himself is the only One Who can do them. ... God transforms us from the inside out. We don't reform ourselves... we don't just try harder to be good people and love God. ... We trust God to begin this work of change in us... from the inside... and then it works itself out. ...That's what Joshua wants them to stop and think about.

Joshua 24:21

Anyone who serves the Lord must have this kind of determination that regardless of the difficulties and perils of service, they will serve anyway.

Joshua 24:22-23

Lip service... even though persistent... is not enough. Without action... it is worthless. Joshua had heard the words of their pledge... but they needed to prove their sincerity... by their works.

And then... a pledge needs to be remembered. Joshua attempts to bond their pledge to their memories. ... Constantly reflecting on pledges you've made to the Lord... is also excellent heart preparation before worship.

Joshua 24:24-28

The Bible Book titled "Joshua" ends with an obituary. ... Now that might seem like a rather "dry-as-toast" means of closing an otherwise interesting

book. But it is certainly more than a “Where-are-they-now?” section for the cast members. These obituaries have been placed here to underscore the emphasis of the book. GOD IS FAITHFUL TO HIS PROMISE.

Each one was buried *in the land* that Yahweh promised them. They have died; but their tombstones are monuments to the fidelity of Yahweh to his promise of the land.

Joshua 24:29-34

The reference to the 'bones of Joseph' ESPECIALLY TESTIFY OF God's faithfulness. ...The Book of Genesis closes with Joseph clinging to God's promise of the land. ... It is an astounding picture. Joseph is both over Egypt and in Egypt... but he is certainly **not** of Egypt. As he dies Joseph's eyes are glued to another land... which Yahweh had promised. ... He is so taken with that promise — it is such a passion with him — that he requires his relatives to take his bones to that land... when God leads them out of Egypt... which they did... And now they find their resting place.

A tremendous amount of time has elapsed since Abraham received the promise — 500 to 600 years! ... But... so our writer affirms... the passage of time does not void the promises of God. ... Joshua... Joseph... Eleazar— these... being dead... yet speak.

How has God been speaking to you this morning...? Is it to better prepare your heart for worship each Sunday...? ... Maybe God has placed His finger on the fact that you have been straddling the fence... living indecisively... not quite sure whether you are willing to do away with some idols in your life... It might be that God is calling for you to make a more whole-hearted

decision to follow Him... to stop trying to live as a “Secret Service Christian.” He might be wanting you to start speaking out for Him among your friends. Are you ready to go public with your faith...? ...To start sharing the difference Christ is making in your life...?

Following Christ is not easy or comfortable. There are costs, demands made on you. You have to understand that fact ahead of going into it. The choice is not about what other people think; it can't be made to please your family or your boyfriend or your peer group. Don't make a decision because of what your friends have done. Make certain it's your choice and yours alone to commit yourself to Jesus Christ.