

FAREWELL ADDRESSES

Deuteronomy 31; Joshua 23-24; Acts 20:13-38

For my final two messages I wanted to deal with leadership transitions from a biblical perspective. So, last Sunday we looked at the portion of scripture in the Book of Kings related to the leadership transition between Elijah and Elisha. That was a very relevant passage. Today in this concluding message, I want to draw some lessons from three farewell messages given by Moses, Joshua and Paul. Moses and Joshua addressed the congregation of Israel, and, Paul, en route to Rome via Jerusalem, addressed the Ephesian elders. Each of these messages contains both challenges and personal words. That pattern fits well with what I want to do today.

The first farewell comes from Moses. When he gave his farewell message he was 120 years old—considerably older than I am. When he gave his message he had led the congregation of Israel for 40 years—considerably longer than I have been your pastor. In those two areas there is dissimilarity. But, there are areas of clear similarity in what he said.

Moses was for the Exodus and the wilderness. He was not God's leader for the conquest and the settlement in the land. God had assigned him a different leg of the race. That is the way biblical leadership works. God makes different assignments to different individuals and their responsibility is to be faithful in their assignment. We are not to whine about our assignment or envy somebody else's assignment. We are simply to seek to be faithful in the one that God gives to us.

Moses' assignment concludes prior to Canaan. He would not go into the land. But as he stood on Mount Nebo and peered into the land and into Israel's future, he was full of anticipation. From that high vantage point, he was able to see Jericho, the city of Palms, and as far as Zoar. God showed him the land from Gilead to Dan [Deuteronomy 34: 1-3]. What he saw was green. He saw fruitfulness. He knew that the best land was ahead and would be found with the people pushing on. That thrilled him.

From my vantage point I see green. I see fruitfulness. I believe that there is blessing ahead as you push forward. The fall has begun with a bang. The Carmel Kids blessed us in August. Promotion Sunday was a blessed day. The schools are brimming with students and excitement. These students are being trained to glorify God, and they are being used and are going to be used to make a difference in our world. The women's ministry had a marvelous beginning. We are getting ready to experience an exciting missional fall. There is green everywhere. There is green ahead. That thrills me. Push on. As Moses knew and I know, we have not come to this point for naught. We have not learned the lessons of the desert for naught. It is time to push on.

As with Israel, with the blessings there will be huge challenges. But, notice what Moses said, ***"The Lord Himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged" [Deuteronomy 31:8].***

You can't beat that promise. That sounds very New Testamentish doesn't it? God is going with you. He has been and is unfolding His plan. He is orchestrating His plan. He has and is assembling His leaders for the next leg of the trip. The journey is by no means over.

Moses reminded Israel that God would go with an obedient people. Determine today to continue to obey His word. You obey the Lord. Teach your children His Word, so they will hear it, learn to fear the Lord their God and obey. You do your part. Debbie, Sean and Joseph are going to do theirs. They will partner with you to impress the truth of God on the hearts of your children.

Everyone in the congregation of Israel who was 40 years and younger had only known Moses as the leader. If you are 21 years old and younger and have been at Carmel the whole time, you have only known me as the pastor. It will be different. As I told the staff, it will feel weird for awhile. Let's deweird it. God is in charge. God's Joshua and Elisha are ready to lead. Take the land.

Fast forward a few years after the conquest, the allotment and the settlement and you have Joshua giving his farewell address to Israel. As he challenged the people and called for their commitment, he reminded them of the faithfulness of God.

“You know with all your heart and soul that not one of all the good promises the Lord your God gave you has failed. Every promise has been fulfilled; not one has failed” [Joshua 23:14].

Some of you can go back a ways with me and trace the faithfulness of God in getting us around relocation, moving us here, providing a wonderful buyer for our old property, our schools, the buildings He provided, our ethnic ministry, etc. With Israel Joshua’s call to faithfulness was not based on some leap in the dark. It was based solidly on the demonstrated faithfulness of God. My call to you for faithfulness is not some leap in the dark but solidly based on the faithfulness of God to us—our Story. Follow Him. Obey Him. Love Him with all your heart. Commit to this place where God is at work and give it your best. Continue to be faithful to what you do so well—caring, missions, training children, discipling adults, etc.

As Joshua concluded his farewell message, he said the question is not whether God is on our side, but are we on His? We cannot determine what others will do, but we can decide what we will do. As Joshua addressed the families of Israel, he said: “As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.” Take your stand of commitment. You cannot determine what your family, your children and others will ultimately do, but you can certainly do all you can do to influence them in the direction you want them to go. So, raise up stones of testimony, tell them of the faithfulness of God, follow through with your commitment and challenge them to follow through with their commitment as well. Parents, do it while you can. There is a day when your voice is heard. The day comes, as your children grow, when other voices and voices of friends will compete with yours and perhaps even drown yours out. Make your commitment for you and your house now and do all you can do to influence them in the way they should go.

Now, thirdly, in the book of Acts, there is recorded a farewell address from the Apostle Paul.

When Paul sensed that the hardships ahead would most likely end in his execution, he made his way to Jerusalem. From a place called Miletus, he sent for the elders of the church at Ephesus and shared his farewell message with them.

Paul did a number of things in his final message—he shared with them that he had been faithful to preach the word, he warned them about dangers to the flock, etc. But the thing that I want to share from his farewell message today is that he committed them to the Lord.

“Now I commit you to God and to the word of His grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified” [Acts 20:32].

On his departure Paul commended the Ephesians to Christ, the perfect pastor.

He did what no other pastor could do.

He died a sacrificial death for them and offered a way of forgiveness of sins and reconciliation to God. He loved them perfectly. He was their unfailing model.

He left what no other pastor could leave.

My peace I leave with you [John 14:27].

My joy I leave with you [John 15:11].

His presence [Matthew 28:20].

He promised what no leaving pastor can promise.

Constant intercession.

Prepared place for eternity.

That he would return.

He is the unique One. Paul commended the Ephesians to Jesus Christ. I commend you to Jesus Christ.

What great final messages! These are the messages that I leave with you.

Now, for some more personal words.

I am not 120 years old like Moses, I don’t think I am about to die like Joshua and I am not in imminent danger of being executed like Paul. But I am transitioning out of this role into another.

I am not retiring from ministry. Hopefully, there is still much to do. At 85, Caleb asked Joshua for the hill country and an opportunity to fight the strong Anakites [Joshua 14:6-12]. I am a long way from 85, but I still have some hill-climbing to do. I am not retiring from ministry nor am I weary of preaching. But good pastoring is more than preaching. It requires casting vision and fresh energy to work to achieve the vision. It is time for someone with fresh vision and new energy to run the next leg.

When I began this process over 18 months ago, I believed it was the right thing to do and the right time to begin the process. But I still hoped that I was making the right decision. But over these months, God has confirmed the decision in my heart. I feel good about where we are.

I want to have some time to teach. I began preaching at 17 and pastoring at 26. While I was pastoring my first church and writing my dissertation, I taught Old Testament on the faculty of one of our seminaries. I loved it. However, when I finished by dissertation, I left the faculty because I saw a lack of pastoral experience as a weakness of seminary teaching. I was invited back several times over the years, but never believed it was what God wanted me to do at that time. Well, I now have 40 years of pastoral experience, so maybe it is time to do the teaching. Presently, I am an online faculty member teaching Old Testament with Liberty Seminary and will prayerfully decide if I will help out at Gordon Conwell Seminary.

I also want to do some writing. I have thoughts of a book or two that I might put together. If I do, I will expect all of you to buy it. If anybody has or knows of a small, unused, free office space where I could work on a book, Brenda would love having me out of the house.

Are there other things that I might do—preaching, etc.? Yes, but I am not sure at the moment what that may be. I will be spending much more time with my family and my grandsons.

One of the most complicated things I faced in leaving is deciding what to do with my library. I have a lot of books, which I accumulated over the years. When I was in seminary I had a professor who told us that if we had to decide between buying a book and buying a shirt so we had something to wear, to buy the book. So I did. He was speaking to the value of having a library. So, I had to deal with a library of several thousand volumes, because they certainly couldn't go home with me. I have selected some to keep that I may need in my teaching. I have let the preaching team take the ones that they wanted. The rest will go into our library here at the church so that you can use them. If we don't have room for all of them in the library, we will just set up tables and let you select some you would like to have.

Many of you have asked if we are staying in Charlotte. We are. We will continue to live where we are for now. If we at some point downsize, we will stay in the area.

Then you have asked if we are staying at Carmel. No, we will leave Carmel for a period of time. That is not a rejection of you. That is my decision, which I think is the wise thing to do. I could stay and be supportive, I would love to be here because this is my church and I would like to be here because my family is here, but it is better for the new pastor to have an opportunity to get rooted without a former pastor around. The focus needs to shift from me to him and from the past to the future. In a 4 by 100 relay, the attention is on the one who is running, not the one who has run.

So, then the question is, "Where will we go to church?" We haven't had to make that decision since the early years of our marriage when we were in seminary, before I had a student pastorate. I don't know. We will visit a number of churches in these next months. Some of the time, I may be preaching in various churches. We will just take that one Sunday at a time.

I am excited about my future and yours. Regardless, this is still a bitter-sweet experience. Ending a ministry of 21 years is not easy. Leaving a great staff, friends and a congregation is painful. One of the things that aggravates me the most is that I am old enough to do this. I never thought I would be at retirement age, but here I am. I don't know why I thought I would be the exception. The Rolling Stones had a song entitled, "Time is On My Side." The backup singers would chime in with, "Yes, it is, yes, it is." The truth is, "No, it isn't. No, it isn't." Time keeps moving. Thank you for allowing me to be your pastor for these years. This is a good place to end my full-time pastoral ministry. Next week you will have an

opportunity to meet, listen to and vote on a wonderful candidate. The race continues. The torch is being passed. God is in charge and we give Him praise.

Paul, in that farewell message to the Ephesian elders, said that he had preached to both Jew and Gentile to turn to God in repentance and have faith in Jesus Christ. I call you to that one last time.