

Renewing Faith

Joshua 8:30-35

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Randy Lovelace

Powerful testimony to begin with. We are fragile. We are empty. We need the Lord. In the middle of this summer, it is good for us to remember that we are encouraged to renew our faith—not the faith itself being renewed, but our renewal to it. That’s what we come to this morning in Joshua 8:30-35. It is Israel obeying what the Lord had commanded through Moses, which has already been read for you this morning. But in a much deeper sense, it was the recognition of his need. And this is what we’re called to do, is to recognize our need again and again and again.

What we will find—and of course, I could not have planned it this way—but the song with Julie offered of being fragile, that is exactly what Israel was. There is not a single passage about Israel in any of its victories that the following conclusion could be made. Israel never won a single battle because it was a really amazing army. It wasn’t larger. It wasn’t mightier. It wasn’t stronger. Oftentimes, it was the weaker. It was fragile in a very vulnerable place. And yet look what Joshua calls the people to do. This is instructive for us, for what we are called to do as a fragile people. We are not here because of our strength, our wisdom, our intelligence, our upbringing. We are here because of the grace of the Lord. And we are to remember that week in, week out. So let’s go to the Lord, to his Word, Joshua 8:30-35, to hear of this renewing faith.

At that time Joshua built an altar to the Lord, the God of Israel, on Mount Ebal, just as Moses the servant of the Lord had commanded the people of Israel, as it is written in the Book of the Law of Moses, “an altar of uncut stones, upon which no man has wielded an iron tool.” And they offered on it burnt offerings to the Lord and sacrificed peace offerings. And there, in the presence of the people of Israel, he wrote on the stones a copy of the law of Moses, which he had written. And all Israel, sojourner as well as native born, with their elders and officers and their judges, stood on opposite sides of the ark before the Levitical priests who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord, half of them in front of Mount Gerizim and half of them in front of Mount Ebal, just as Moses the servant of the Lord had commanded at the first, to bless the people of Israel. And afterward he read all the words of the law, the blessing and the curse, according to all that is written in the Book of the Law. There was not a word of all that Moses commanded that Joshua did not read before all the assembly of Israel, and the women, and the little ones, and the sojourners who lived among them. [ESV]

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Please pray with me.

Now we ask that you, O Lord, would help us to see in this important chapter of the history of your redemption of this people, Israel, who are our forefathers spiritually. Because those who belong to you, all who call on the name of the Lord, are of one family. This, Lord, you have set before us as a chapter, as a part of the history of our earlier family. Lord, help us to see you in their midst. Help us to learn the lessons you would teach us. And we ask as you did with Israel in this place, may you do so with us this very morning, enabling us to renew our faith. Help the teacher. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

So as we think about the Book of Joshua, just by mere fact of context, there are four very large themes that are unpacked, and oftentimes they are done at the same time. But these four themes in the Book of Joshua really are these: the land, that is the promised land; rest, the physical, spiritual rest for God’s people in the midst of this land which God had promised them; to remember his covenant; and

finally, the purity of worshipping the Lord. So land, rest, covenant, and purity of worshipping the Lord. These are themes which will be unpacked from the beginning to the end of Joshua. In many ways, what we find in these very verses are all four.

Now, while I'm not going to unpack each one, you're going to see different elements of these themes all packed within these five verses. But what we want to see, what I want us to experience and see in this text this morning, is the way in which their faith is renewed. We see it in these two outlined points. Renewal of faith as a powerful witness. They're not doing it for the sake of witness, but their renewing of their faith is a witness to the world. Secondly, renewal of the faith as a powerful awakening. Or, if you will, a reawakening. Because this is required, because as we will see, just adjacent to this passage is both success and massive failure. Already through eight chapters of Joshua, we see the ups and downs of the people of God. And this points to why renewal is important. It is a witness, and it is an opportunity for an awakening—for a reawakening.

And in the event you can't see the direct application—there's no need for us to springboard, if you will, from Joshua 8 all the way to Jesus. It's not necessary. Because the themes are the same. Salvation is present. God's faithfulness is present. God's provision is present. What we see in the gospel are the very same things. And if the people of God in the midst of the Canaan land which God had promised them and they were yet in the middle of a journey needed to renew their faith and trust in the Lord, how much more so are we also not in need of renewing our faith? And the renewing of our faith is a witness to the world, but it is also an opportunity for us to be reawakened to who the Lord is. The renewal as a powerful witness, and renewal as a powerful awakening.

First, let's look at the "win" of this renewal in its taking place. So what has just been happening within the drama of Joshua is that Jericho is behind them. That's important to remember, because God had brought them and promised them the land of Canaan, but what they found was they found enemy nations who were much larger, much more powerful, and much more ensconced in where they were. And Jericho was one of those places. It was a fortified city. And yet God in his faithfulness gave it to them. And he said, "You are to utterly wipe it out." What we find is that Israel defeated—by God's grace defeated Jericho. But what they failed to do was to follow the second part—was to do away with all of it. But what they did was they stole some for themselves. And then they chose to hide it. And yet God's anger and judgment burned against them. So while God tells his people to conquer the land of Canaan and all the peoples who are there because they both hated God and they hated his people, he also is very fair. Because he says, "I will not allow this to happen in the midst of my people." And so he condemns Akin for his sin.

And then in some sense they recover from that, and then they have a battle at Ai, and they are victorious. But what's important is that they are just getting to the middle of the land of Canaan. It is not a completely place of conquest. Rather, it's a place that they're still journeying in. This is not a safe time to be doing this. As one writer said, "This is the most unstrategic thing you could possibly do, and in the most unstrategic place to do it." Enemy people are still around them, and they're right here at this important mountain range. Mount Ebal, Mount Gerizim, in which there is a valley in between. And there's a city called Shechem, which I'll get to in a moment. And this place was not a place that was hospitable to the Israelites, yet it was an important city. And yet Joshua says, "No, we're going to do this right here, right now." Even though they were still in the middle of their journey. Emancipation was behind them, but conquest was very much far in the future.

Okay. So let's get into the "where" that this is happening and why it's important. You've already heard it read this morning that this is precisely the place that Moses had dictated that the people of God would seek to renew the covenant—that is, as we've looked at before, we can take the word "covenant" and substitute the word "relationship." It is the constitution, the formalizing of a relationship between God and his people, a covenant. And this covenant was a covenant to Abraham that was then continually unfolding in its fulfillment. And it had already been fulfilled through Moses. They were emancipated from

Egypt. And so once that took place, Moses says, “Once you get to this mountain and these two mountains with this valley in between, this is precisely what you are to do.”

But there’s more here. What’s important is that Shechem was really the place that was important—that was the city in between these two mountains. So what was to happen was half of the people were to be on Mount Ebal, and the other half were to be on Mount Gerizim. And one was to read the curses. The other was to read the blessings. Now, in between this valley—you can still go there today, and apparently over the years you could still be in the valley and hear things that were happening on these two mountains. So it was meant to be, if you will, antiphonal. A dialogue. A dialogue with God and a dialogue of the Israelite people remembering God’s promises, remembering his faithfulness, remembering his salvation, remembering these things. And they were to shout it out, and all of the law of God was to be read because of what lay in between. And that was Shechem.

Shechem was important because of what happened in the earliest part of the Book of Genesis. In the Book of Genesis 12, we hear these words from the Lord to Abraham. Genesis 12:6-7 are these words. He says:

Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. Then the Lord appeared to Abram and said, “To your offspring I will give this land.” So he built there an altar to the Lord, who had appeared to him. From there he moved to the hill country on the east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. And there he built an altar to the Lord and called upon the name of the Lord. And Abram journeyed on, still going toward the Negeb.
[Genesis 12:6-9, ESV]

So this was an important place, because it was in this place which was the birthplace of God’s promise to Abraham that this land is to be yours. But then also not only did we hear about this in Deuteronomy 27—we also hear these words in Deuteronomy 11. So what was it, then, in the midst of this place that they were remembering? Yes, they were to read the law. Yes, they were to read its blessings and its curses. But hear these words about this land that God had promised to Abraham and to his offspring.

“But the land that you are going over to possess is a land of hills and valleys, which drinks water by the rain from heaven, a land that the Lord your God cares for. The eyes of the Lord your God are always upon it, from the beginning of the year to the end of the year.

“And if you will indeed obey my commandments that I command you today, to love the Lord your God, and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul, he will give the rain for your land in its season, the early rain and the later rain, that you may gather in your grain and your wine and your oil. And he will give grass in your fields for your livestock, and you shall eat and be full. Take care lest your heart be deceived, and you turn aside and serve other gods and worship them; then the anger of the Lord will be kindled against you.”

[Deuteronomy 11:11-17, ESV]

Then in verse 18, he says these words:

“You shall therefore lay up these words of mine in your heart and in your soul, and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall teach them to your children, talking of them when you are sitting in your house, and when you are walking by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall write them on the

doorposts of your house and on your gates, that your days and the days of your children may be multiplied in the land that the Lord swore to your fathers to give them, as long as the heavens are above the earth.”
[Deuteronomy 11:18-21, ESV]

What they are doing in the midst of this place is remembering that God called Abraham not because he was worthy—because he was not. Not because he was innately obedient—he was not. God called him out because he chose him. And he made him first his son. Then he made him a family. Then he made him a nation. And then this nation is now finally in the place where that original promise was given, that this land will be yours. Though the journey is not finished, though surrounded by enemies, though tempted to fall away from the Lord, as they already evidenced, the Lord in his grace says in this place at this time, “Remember who I am. Remember what I have promised you. Remember what I have warned you about. This is what you are to do.”

This was to be a witness. Because here you have a weak nation in an enemy land taking the opportunity to break from the war, to do something which is not in anyone’s strategic interest from a military standpoint, and they stop, and they worship. Now, I can’t imagine any general ever saying this to his people. “All right, men. In the middle of the battle, I want you to stop, and I want you to remember, and I want you to sing, and I want you to read the Constitution, and I want you to remember the Bill of Rights. And I want you to do that right there on the front lines. Do that really loud. You guys get over here, and you get over there, and just read them together. And this is what we’ll do.” It’s absurd. It’s absurd even when we have the military might that we have.

What is it a witness to? It is not a witness to Israel’s strength. It is not a witness to Israel’s—perhaps seen as stupidity. It is a witness that this is a people who are very different, very odd, who are doing something very crazy, and yet it is a witness that it is the Lord who is with them. And they are committing themselves to the God of heaven and earth. They are committing themselves to all the ethics and the obedience of God’s righteousness and holiness. They were remembering that it is their God who they worship. And they fear him more than they fear their enemies. Do you see that? They fear him more than they fear their enemies. For if you stop in the middle of a battle to remember something else other than the battle that you’re in the midst of, that means you fear something more than those you fight. You honor something more than what you’re warring for. Indeed, the land wasn’t just for the land’s sake. The land was to be the place that was the fulfillment of God’s grace and mercy.

And so they stop, and they worship, and they remember. That is what we do every single Sunday morning. Sure, we do not live in a land where we are fearing anyone coming into these doors saying that we are not allowed to worship or anything of the sort—thanks be to God. And yet the very same temptations to worship foreign gods, the very same opportunities to fall away from the Lord are still in our midst, because of the world that we live in. And there is absolutely nothing in us to keep us from doing just that. Because we are fragile, empty people—except by God’s grace alone. And when we gather together every Sunday morning, what do we do? We sing. He invites. We confess. He responds. We sing. He speaks. We give. He has given. We learn and we are sent out.

What we see in these early verses of chapter 8—rather, the end of chapter 8—we see that what the people of God are doing is what the people of God have always been called to do. We have been freed from sin and its consequence, which is death spiritually, and we’ve been given salvation and forgiveness. While emancipation is for all those who call on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, final victory is not yet won. Death is still present. Sin is still present. Tears and suffering and brokenness are still present. Conquest is not yet finished, though Christ is seated at the right hand of God the Father. While there has been much that has been accomplished on our behalf, there is also plenty of not yet. But when the Lord comes again, as is his promise, then we will sit and we will rest and we will no longer be fragile. We will no longer be vulnerable. We will no longer cry. We will no longer be hungry.

But until that day, we are still in the midst of a journey. And as long as we are still in this journey, we come together every Sunday morning to be reminded not of our strength, but his. Of our need, and of his provision. It is pronounced the gospel, and we are invited to participate in it. And we are reminded of its warnings, that if we fail to call on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we fall under his wrath. But this day is a day of grace and a day of renewal every single Sunday morning. And it is a witness. It is a witness to the world—not because we're looking for a place to give our gifts so we can reduce our taxes. Not because we need a crutch or we need a friendly group of people to hang around.

It is because we are to be a peculiar people who are called out to do something which seems very odd to the watching world. We worship and we believe in this Word. And it is taught, and we respond. We see our need, and we confess our need, and yet he is gracious and faithful to respond. It is a very odd thing to do every Sunday morning. But why do we do it? Not because we've thought it up. Not because it's particular strategic. Not because it seems wise to the world. It is because we stop and we remember, it is the Lord who has brought us thus far. And it is his promise the he will bring us home. And until he does, we come to him again and again and again.

But let's go further. Not only do we see renewal as a powerful witness—it is renewal as a powerful awakening. As I've already stated before, when we read in these words that they are, all of Israel, including those who are sojourners—that means there were those who came with them who were perhaps from Egypt, those who had joined them in the midst of their journeys who were now followers of the Lord God but not native Israelites. Yet they belong. And all the children, they were gathered together. And now we look at the “what.”

And again we see that when they were commanded that they were to read all the law in its entirety, the blessings and the curses, according to all that is written in the Word. Again, it says, remembering what it is—remembering the promises of the Lord, his relationship with them, his mighty works, his faithfulness, his glory and honor, his holiness. This is central to following the Lord. They are not there commending themselves, commending their might, commending their faithfulness. They were commending God's might and his. We as individuals and we as a corporate people—we are to never commend ourselves for anything. And we certainly never commend ourselves for our endurance, our faithfulness, our strength. The only one we commend is the Lord himself.

What do we have that he has not given? What accomplishment have we experienced that he was not the one who gave us the gifts and the ability, the place and the time, to do it? What dark place have we ever been in, could we ever say, along with the psalmist, “Even if I go to Sheol, even there your right hand holds me fast.” Whether we feel close to the Lord or we feel far away, it is never predicated on us. We cannot commend our feelings as being the truth of all that is, and we cannot commend our successes for all that it is. It is the Lord, always, that we commend. This is why and this is what, rather, they are remembering. We worship and remember.

What's interesting in the middle of this text is something that's easy to sort of pass by, but I want you to see it again. This is what they do. Verse 31, “And they offered on it burnt offerings to the Lord and sacrificed peace offerings.” There's something very interesting about this meal, because it is very much like a meal that would—that in many ways, this is the really long-time forerunner of what we see happen on the night in which Jesus was betrayed. Because in this Passover meal is a meal of peace. It is a meal that is pointing to a sacrifice. What happens on the night in which Jesus was betrayed? They had come this far with the Lord—all that he had taught and promised—and yet now he's getting ready to go to the cross, the ultimate place of shame. And yet the Lord stops, and he gives them a meal.

He gives them a meal, and he says, “When you eat of this bread and you drink of this cup,” what does he say, “you remember, you remember, you remember. And you are to continue the celebration of this meal until I return again to you.” What does that mean for that meal? At its most basic—it is so much more than this, but at its most basic, it is a meal of remembrance of our need and the Lord's provision of

his Son. And when we take of this bread and we drink of this cup, we eat of it, we drink of it, and we remember, and we rejoice. And our hearts are gladdened. Our taste buds are awakened, because we remember it is the Lord's sacrifice for us. This is what the people of God are doing, and it is the reason—it's not just for witness. It is also the fact that you and I are given to forgetting. We are so easily forgetful.

Forgetting is a passive action. Not remembering is an active way of doing something, but to forget is something that slips our minds. We get so busy, we get so inundated, we get so distracted, our schedules are so full, we get so just into the sauce of who we are and what we're doing and the craziness of it. And people ask us how we're doing. Oh, we're fine. Oh, we're good. Oh, we're busy. It's all that stuff. And next thing we know, three, four, five days go by. And we feel and we sense a spiritual emptiness. You see, we so easily are given to forgetfulness, and we forget the Lord. We forget he is the one who gives us life. So when we come to worship, as this people did in the midst of their journey, our forefathers stopped and they remembered the promises. This is what we are called to do.

Why do we give a prayer of thanksgiving before a meal? Not because it's cultural. Not because it's the religious thing to do. Not because we're looking to make attention to grandstand. It's that we stop and we say, "Every single ounce of this is because the Lord has provided it. Thank you, Lord." And let's be robust about it. Thank you, Lord, for good drink, good food, good desserts. Thank you for the bounty, even though I haven't been to a farm until, like, last week where I actually picked something that I then took to my house and made. I'm so separated from my food sources, it's easy for me to forget that it's the Lord who provides the rain. It's the Lord who provides the harvest. It's the Lord who provides the truck drivers and the electricity and all the stuff that comes down to that milk being in a carton at the back of Giant. It is all from the Lord, though it seems so industrialized—because it is. But that industrialization sometimes causes me to forget, no, it's the Lord who's behind all of it. It's all a gift. Thanks be to God. Amen? This is why we do this liturgical order of thanking God for our meals. Because it is he who gave it. We remember his promises.

Finally, it is the why. He says to them, they are to go on Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal. They are to recite these covenant promises, and they are to do so. And afterward he was—and Joshua, as kings were instructed to do in Deuteronomy, to read all the words of the law, the blessings and the curses, according to all that has been written. There was not a word of all that Moses commanded that Joshua did—not read before the assembly of all Israel, the men and women, the little ones and the sojourners who lived among them. This was the first of two great renewal ceremonies. It comes again in Joshua 24. And this will be repeated throughout the life and blood of Israel itself.

Why? It is because the Lord's faithfulness is eternal, unshakeable. There is no shadow of turning with him. But that is not the case with us. It's not that we are trying to renew the power of the covenant. It's that we are giving ourselves to why we began to believe it to begin with. Why do we renew? Why are they renewing? Because it's an opportunity to say, "What do we believe again?" So that we don't fall intellectually asleep or spiritually asleep or relationally asleep. We are reminded that we believe these things *because*. This is an important rule of thumb for all those who follow the Lord. And as we look now to the fulfillment of God's promises to Israel that he would redeem them, we see the ultimate expression of that. The ultimate Joshua is the King of kings and the Lord of lords, the Lord Jesus Christ.

And so we are called to receive the promise of the gospel, his salvation, because of what he has done for us. We receive it, and we believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. We confess with our mouths and our hearts that Jesus Christ is Lord, and we seek to follow him in humble reliance, confessing our sins, receiving the promised forgiveness. We love the Lord our God with our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love our neighbor as ourselves. We seek to sharpen one another and love one another, and to care for those widows and orphans. We seek to work out our salvation in what he has called us to do. And by God's grace, we then seek to, by his Spirit, to live out his Word, to obey the moral law.

The reality is, though the Lord's faithfulness is eternal, ours is not. We need opportunities and moments of renewal where we remember, "Why do I believe this again?" And may I dare say, "Do I believe this still?" It is right and appropriate for us to do this. I say this on good authority. Because in preparation for this sermon, I came across the testimony of perhaps one of the greatest writers in the English language, who was Scottish, whose works were revered throughout Scotland for centuries. His name is Thomas Boston. Now, Thomas Boston kept copious amounts of personal journals. He never intended for them to be published, but of course someone in his family did. So there we go. And here is one such thing which we read about in his life. He says, "I kept a secret fast in order for my preparation for death," though at this point he was nowhere near his death. Rather what he did was, he said this:

After [I made my confession], intending to renew my acceptance of God's covenant of grace, to write it also, and subscribe with my hand, I viewed two former ones, the one dated August 14, 1699, the other March 25, 1700, and drew up a new one.

These things being intermixed with prayer, being done, I went, and kneeling at my bedside, did, in prayer, then and there, solemnly, and in express words, according to what I had written with my hand, take hold of God's covenant of grace for life and salvation to me, with my whole heart...; and rising up from prayer, I stood, and lifting up my eyes to the Lord, I silently read before him the acceptance I had written, and subscribed it with my hand.

"I, Mr. Thomas Boston, preacher of the gospel of Christ, being by nature an apostate from God, an enemy to the great Jehovah and so an heir of hell and wrath, in myself utterly lost and undone, because of my original and actual sins... and being in some measure, made sensible of this my lost and undone state, and sensible of my need, my absolute need, of a Savior... and believing that Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of the eternal God, is not only able to save me... both from my sins and from the load of wrath due to me for them... come to him for salvation, and cordially receive him in all his offices, consenting to the terms of the covenant therefore, as I have, at several opportunities before...

"I do by this declare that I... do solemnly covenant and engage to be the Lord's, and make a solemn resignation... of myself, my soul, my body, spiritual and temporal concerns, unto the Lord Jesus Christ, without any reservations whatsoever...

And this solemn covenant I make as in the presence of the ever-living, heart-searching God, and subscribe it with my hand, in my chamber at Dunse, about one o'clock in the afternoon, the fourteenth day of August, one thousand six hundred and ninety-nine years. T. Boston."

[In Andrew Thomson, Thomas Boston, 46-47]

It is not required that you and I go home today and write in a journal. It is not required today that our renewal take a particular frame. But we gather together corporately every Sunday to renew the covenant of grace, to remember God's amazing grace, and we have it only as a gift of faith. Not of intellect. Not of zip code. Not of background. But all of grace by faith. I, like you, am fragile and empty. I am in my heart and in my loves, I am like a cheap cologne on a countertop at the mall. I smell good for an instant, but then the whiff goes away. My love often has a short shelf-life, though I wish it didn't. I preach the great words of the greatest Book ever written. And yet I know that I do so only as a gift of grace.

I struggle with prayer on a Monday just like you do. I'm inundated by the works and all the things I have to do, and I become distracted, even in the midst of being distracted by doing the work of ministry. I forget to pray, because ministry is so busy. Now there's an irony. I know just as my forbearer Thomas Boston needs renewal, I need renewal. Just as we corporately renew, we need to individually renew. Not because the Lord's grace and faithfulness is not eternal; it's because we are weak, and we need the renewing power of his Holy Spirit.

I'm going to be going on vacation for just a little bit to get some renewal. I want you to gain that same renewal. You've heard me say—and I'll finish with this—you've heard me say that we've moved our time of vision season to the fall. I've spent the last several weeks working with our pastoral team, and we're going to spend the next few months preparing that. We need the Lord's renewal, not for any other reason than because we are fragile sinners and broken about the head and Presbyterian. We need the Lord's renewal. But this we know—that when we remember him, it is the Lord who first remembered us. And he will meet us. I don't know what that is to look like for you. I know what it looks like for me. Let me encourage you to be renewed in what you believe, why you believe it, and whether you believe it. And may the Lord by his Holy Spirit renew our faith, a hunger for him, in making him known—a love for one another in humility and grace and mercy, that the Lord may fill us as a people with a great joy, because he is the only one who can be commended: a God of grace and mercy and love. Let's pray together.

Father, we ask now and I ask on behalf of this, a portion of your worldwide body, of which you've called me as an under-shepherd—I ask that you would renew us as a people in our faith. Renew us corporately, that Jesus Christ is Lord, and that his gospel is indeed good news to a weary people. It is a glass of water to a thirsty land. It is the rejoicing of a people who've forgotten how to sing. Lord, I ask that you would make us a people renewed corporately, but also a people renewed individually. For Lord, we are weak and fragile and empty. You have given us this gospel, and you've given it to us by grace, and we believe it by faith—and even that is a gift. So Lord, we ask by your Holy Spirit, renew faith in us, that we might be a renewed people given to you for your purposes to make your Name known as a Name that is worthy of all praise. We ask this in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.