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**December 18, 2011**



## **SEND YOURSELF TO THE NATIONS**

**Jim Wood, Senior Pastor**

Today we're going to be looking at two beautiful, powerful passages. Two passages that I believe, if we allow it, can change our lives. The first is in the book of Joshua, the first chapter, the first nine verses.

I have used this trick question with a number of you before. In Bible trivia, I often ask, "How long did it take the Israelites to get to the Promised Land?" Usually we say forty years, and I always say that's the wrong answer. It took them eighteen months to get there. They reached the Promised Land in eighteen months after they were freed from the bondage of Pharaoh in Egypt.

The Israelites sent twelve spies who came up from the east-southeast in a direct path and wandered around through the wilderness, making a big swath through the land. The twelve spies said that the

land was exactly what God promised. It was beautiful; it had everything-- flowing with milk and honey just as God promised. BUT there were also giants. There were huge powerful people. In Numbers chapter thirteen, verse 33 says, "And we seemed to ourselves like grasshoppers."

Ten of the twelve said, "We shouldn't go in."

Two, Joshua and Caleb, said, "No, let's go. God promised it, and let's take it."

Well, in a majority vote the people decided they wouldn't go in; so, they wandered another thirty-eight and a half years, wandering in a circle while they began the process of believing that they were worth what God had promised them. Now you are going to read today what God says to Joshua at the very end of that extra thirty-eight and a half years, which were really unnecessary. It was a word that came to Joshua, who was one who could say, "I told you so."

Sheryl and I have been married for over thirty years; and one time in our first year of marriage, I was right in an argument. It is the only time in recorded history of our marriage that I have been right. I know I was right because I asked all my friends about it, and they all agreed that I was right. I have always thought that it was very important for me to remind Sheryl that I was right for more than thirty years now. "Do you remember that time that I was right?"

I'm joking, but not joking. Can you imagine what it would be like for Joshua? Thirty-eight and a half years--stuck in the desert because people didn't listen to him. Then God says to him, "Joshua, you're the one who's going to take them in."

Now let's be honest. What one of us wouldn't do it and say, "We're going to do this, but in the mean time I want to let you know how stupid you were thirty-eight years ago." Can you imagine what's going on in Joshua's mind after thirty-eight years? Wouldn't you think he'd want to get his point across in some way? Well, Joshua doesn't. He's a godly man and he leads his people, and it's a powerful, powerful book.

## **Joshua 1:1-9**

*After the death of Moses the servant of the Lord, the Lord spoke to Joshua son of Nun, Moses' assistant, saying, "My servant Moses is dead. Now proceed to cross the Jordan, you and this entire people, into the land that I am giving to them, to the Israelites. Every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon I have given to you, as I promised to Moses. From the wilderness and the Lebanon as far as the great river, the river Euphrates, all the land of the Hittites, to the Great Sea in the west shall be your territory. No one shall be able to stand against you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you. Be strong and courageous; for you shall put this people in possession of the land that I swore to their ancestors to give them. Only be strong and very courageous, being careful to act in accordance with all the law that my servant Moses commanded you; do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, so that you may be successful wherever you go. This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth; you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to act in accordance with all that is written in it. For then you shall make your way prosperous, and then you shall be successful. I hereby command you: Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go."*

Now in the New Testament there were only three people who are called the servant of the Lord, the servant of Yahweh, the servant of God— Moses, David, and Joshua. In the book of Joshua, it is almost as if it is reserved for the end of the book before he receives the mantle, "servant of the Lord."

You are going to hear someone different in the New Testament say that she--yes, a woman-- is the servant of the Lord. She was a young girl who was probably twelve to fourteen years old. It has been interesting in the last fifteen or twenty years. We have captured the reality that Mary, the mother of Jesus, was betrothed. When we look at the historical records, we realize that as a betrothed girl, she would have been, at the youngest, around twelve and at the oldest fourteen

or fifteen. The reality is that Mary is probably 13 or 14 years old. God's Word comes to her as an angel.

It is interesting how the Bible keeps opening itself to me, and I think, "Why didn't I see that before?" Here's a girl who says she is a servant of the Lord. She knows the Bible and she knows that is a huge claim she is making; but keep in mind that in the Gospel of Luke, when it came time for her to deliver, she was with Joseph to whom she was betrothed, she still wasn't married. It was a relatively long process being engaged, and usually it took about a year or more before you became actually married, so she was still yet to be married to Joseph. She is a girl who is living in a culture where virginity is highly, highly, highly valued. She realizes this, as she is in a small town in Galilee. It is such a backward place. If we looked at it from the aspect of Hampton Roads, it would be like Pungo--not a bad place, but small and remote. (If there is anyone here from Pungo, please just bear with me).

People from Galilee would have had heavy accents. Even as they were standing around the fire the night Jesus was betrayed, someone would say, "Aren't you one of the Galileans?" They would say that because they can recognize them by their heavy accent, so heavy that people of their own faith would have had a hard time understanding them. It was a backwoods, backwater, small kind of place, with small numbers of people with "big lips," meaning they were big gossips.

Now keep in mind that we often talk about what it would be like for Mary as this girl. God comes to her as an angel and speaks his word, and she accepts it. Then she delivers the baby. We think about that, but then we kind of forget about Mary until we see her again at the cross as she watches her own son. But imagine what her life would have been. She has a baby while she is unmarried, so the baby is totally illegitimate. She has this life. They go back; she gets away for the baby to be born in Bethlehem; they go to Egypt for a few years; and then they come back to that setting where everyone knows her. For the rest of her life, she's walking around with this "scarlet letter on her chest." Then keep in mind as well, she has this promise. She knows this baby is Jesus, her son, but she also knows he's God. People start skirmishing with him in the playground, and she says, "I

know your kid is trying to pick on mine, but my kid is God." She is just waiting. "Lord, when? I'm in humiliation before my people; you couldn't give me a new place for a fresh start?"

Perhaps people don't want to be around her. She doesn't come from any particular lineage. What does she have? She is just there. I have only recently thought about her this way. What a woman! Let's hear the beginning of Mary's story.

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### **Luke 1: 26-38**

*The Birth of Jesus Foretold. In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.'\* But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High shall overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy. And, behold, your cousin Elisabeth has conceived a son in her old age: and this is the sixth month with her, who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.' Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' Then the angel departed from her.*

Did you notice that last verse, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord"? I want to ask you a question that I've been playing around with in my life for a few weeks now. I want to ask you a question. When you reflect on your life, people that have come across your path, people with whom you have been in a relationship, all [those] that you

would want to be like--of all the people you have known in your life, whom would you want to be like? I think it is a great question. I would encourage you to keep it with you for awhile, write it down or text it to yourself or something. I have found in the few weeks that I have been rolling this question through my head, it has given me the privilege of remembering people that I have long forgotten, people who through simple small ways of grace or forgiveness have touched my life in such significant ways.

I had the same teacher for four years in elementary school-- not because I repeated the grade!-- but Barbara Short, my teacher for the first four years of my education, got married when we were kids, and every boy on the class was just heartbroken. I remember moments where she loved on me. If you are like me, you might realize [you want to be like] an amalgam--different parts of different people that you would like to be like.

I had been asking myself this question when a guy I had long forgotten came to mind. His name was David Clark. When I was in high school in West Columbia, South Carolina, there was a new BI-LO being opened. It was the Wal- Mart of grocery stores at the time, and I mean this was an amazing thing for us. It was on Hwy 378 in West Columbia, South Carolina. Those of us in high school who could scrambled to get over there and we applied for jobs as bag boys. We got paid minimum wage, \$1.65 an hour. We thought we were in high cotton. It was a great place. One of the guys they hired was named Dave Clark. In that day we didn't have the correct way of being able to identify Dave, but today he would be called a child with special needs or a slow learner.

David was a sweet guy, overwhelmingly naive and a hard worker, and he bagged groceries with us. We had a manager named Mr. Banneker, who was a huge guy with hands so big. The funny thing was, the nicer he was to us, the more fearful we were of him. Mr. Banneker would do this thing at bag boy meetings; he would pull out his wallet and get a hundred dollar bill-- which today would be ... 43,800 dollars! He would hold it out and say, "Anybody want this bill? Anybody want it? You can have it."

Finally after he did it about three or four times and no one even moved, my friend Bobby Brigman said, "Mr. Banneker what's the catch?"

He said, "Catch? Well really -- there is no catch."

So they hired David Clark. One day he is in there in our meeting and [Mr. Banneker] says, "Anybody want this hundred dollar bill?"

David Clark just got up, took it, put it in his pocket, said "Thank you, sir," and sat back down. Well we figured we were going to have to look for a missing body somewhere, and we became teenaged sleuths, obsessed to find what happened to David. What was the catch? The truth was that David got the hundred-dollar bill and it was totally a gift. There were absolutely no strings attached at all. Mr. Banneker never offered that hundred dollars again; but it was one of the great leadership tips of my life, because we realized that Mr. Banneker was a confusing, generous guy. We kept working for him because we figured sooner or later he was going to do it again. There was absolutely no catch at all to it.

I have been thinking in my life lately that I would like to be like David Clarke, because I wonder how many times I haven't taken offers that were provided for me, offers of friendship because they just seemed too good to be true. Why would he or she offer forgiveness? Maybe I didn't believe I was worth it, or that they weren't genuine. I wonder how many times I haven't taken offers that were simply free gifts.

Our God is a giving God. That's the nature of God. For God so loved the world... that he gave. Our God is a giving God. If we look at the word "to give" in Hebrew, we realize that it is used more than two thousand times. In fact, the word "to give" is among the top fifteen words used in the Old Testament. The word "to give" is used eighty-nine times in the book of Joshua; and sixty-nine of the eighty-nine times it is used, it is used in the context of God giving the land to our ancestors, the promise of the land. God says to Joshua, "Every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon I have given to you, as I

promised.” Here is the simple reality: God says, “Go, take it, no strings attached, I always keep my promises.”

How many times have I not lived into that? How many times in my life or your life have we said, “There has got to be a catch. There has got to be something more to it.” The truth and reality of God is simply that. “Go, take it, no strings attached. I always keep my promises.”

What prevents that from being some “triumphalistic prosperity theology?” I’ve heard this before. I have actually been in settings where I have heard people who have been so caught up in this “prosperity theology” say, “You know when you pray for the car, don’t only pray for the model of car you want God to give you, but pray for the color.” I look at that and I think there are so many books about that, so many people that we watch and see, and we really talk about this “prosperity theology” that over time it starts to become “triumphalistic.”

That doesn’t work for me, it doesn’t make sense or resonate with my experience in life, but what prevents it if God says, “Go, take it, no strings attached. I always keep my promises.” What prevents us from believing, from accepting that theology and just living into it?

I think Mary helps us. Mary had God come to her; she didn’t go to God. God came to her. He came to her as a girl. God came to her and gave her a promise. He told her what to do. God came to a girl who had no standing. As we know from the gospel of Luke, she had no particular lineage or influence or affluence and was from a backward, backwater place, and God came to her. And Mary very quickly realized there was a privilege that was lacking any hint of merit in her life. God simply said, “This is going to happen to you, Mary. “

In essence what God said was, “Mary, this is what is going to happen. Are you ‘all in’ or not?”

Are you “all in?” Now, I use that phrase intentionally. I know it is a gambling phrase. I use it intentionally because I think it is appropriate. Are we going to put all of our chips in? Are we willing

to put everything in, because this is what God is saying and what he has provided in our life?

Mary said "Do what is according to your will, for I am a servant of the Lord." I so magnify God because he's looked on the love. Mary was "all in." Mary didn't negotiate with God. She didn't say, "Lord, I'll do it, but can you make sure that after five years my name will be restored, or can you at least let me move to a new place and not live with all that?" Mary was "all in."

Think about what happened to her life after. Mary. Everybody knew [about] the baby bump, and she left--went away to Bethlehem, went away to Egypt and came back. Can you imagine the disgrace she more than likely lived in for the rest of her life? She waited thirty-three years or so and she saw her own son executed. But that was not the vindication either, because her people really didn't seem to know or accept. More than likely-- until we believe through our Church history-- more than likely, she stays surrounded by people who discredited her and saw her as an embarrassment. That wasn't the point. Mary was "all in."

The question for you today is, "Are you 'all in?'" Do you really want and trust and believe that God says to you today, "Go, take it, no strings attached. I always keep my promises." Do you believe it? Are you ready for it? Or are you perhaps like I am so often? Is your list already made out with the land you want to occupy?

See, here's the difference I think. What Mary didn't do is what you and I are so tempted to do and so often encouraged to do, because we misappropriate scripture. So often we go to God and we say, "Lord, I know you want me to do this because it feels so right."

"Lord, I know you would never want me to go here, but I do feel like you want me to go here; and so, Lord, I want you to help me do this."

"Lord, I have this particular request because I want healing in my life or in the life of someone."

I go to God with a list with the land I want to occupy. "Lord come and help me, assist me. Give me the strength and the ability. I know it is your will or you wouldn't have made me desire it. I understand all."

That is not what God does. God simply says, "Are you "all in" or not?" He wants to know if you are "all in" before he tells you what it is going to be. He just wants to know, "Are you "all in" or are you not?"

In my first church the young pastor and I did this really cool thing for a while. I found a really neat monastery that I could go to three or four times a year, and I would spend three or four days there-- a couple of days in prayer and a couple of days in worship planning. This was before cell phone time, and I'd go and just be away.

One night at about eleven o'clock a monk knocked on my door and said. "There is an emergency call."

It was this young guy that had joined our church recently. He found out where I was and said it was an emergency, "I need to talk to you." He drove over and got there about 11:30. He stayed for probably four hours. He was an interesting guy. He was new to the church, hadn't really been church, didn't have any church background, he had just gotten married into a family in the church and it was a hard family—wonderful, but a hard family. He married somebody who at that point in her life was pretty hard, and he just wasn't equipped for all of the expectations that were [placed] on him.

I thought, "This guy called me at eleven. Maybe he's ..." I don't know what's going on.

He comes in and says, "I think God spoke to me." Okay. I'm skeptical. I check his breath. He said, "I think God wants me to be 'all in.'" (He'd had a gambling addiction earlier I found out.) "God wants me to be 'all in' and I want to talk about that."

He started talking about his feeling that God was just saying, "'I want you to do this.' I don't even know what it is, God didn't even tell me

what it was, but he's just calling me, grabbing me. Something, Pastor, is just on me and I can't let it go." He goes on and on just talking, rambling for a couple of hours and probably after three hours he kind of came up for air. He looked at me and he said, "Well, here's why I'm here. I want you to tell me whether I'm crazy or not."

True story. I'm a young pastor, I'm tired and I told him what I thought, and I said, "Yeah, I think you are crazy. I think you need some help, some care. You need to get to the doctor. I think you're crazy."

He said, "Great! That's just what I needed to hear." He did get some help. He also e-mailed me last week from the Czech Republic. He's a missionary there now, and he e-mailed me. He does this every year. He said, "Pastor, God is good and I'm still crazy. Merry Christmas!"

I have to be honest with you. It's been so seldom in my life, particularly at that time, when I have ever seen anybody "all in." I didn't even really know it could happen. You know, he left that night and went back to a hard wife and a hard family and hard decisions. Things weren't immediately transformed and changed in his life, but he left "all in" and he's been one of my heroes ever since. He had no idea what God was going to do or say or [where He would send him. Send a kid from Jersey to the Czech Republic! That's a sense of humor!

We had our preschool pageant here on Friday, and it is always so much fun. Abigail Hoy had a beautiful solo. It was really beautiful, with a hundred or more kids up here [*on stage*]. We reached a point where Claudia Wooden was moving from the guitar to the piano, and there was a short little lull. Everyone was just trying to keep the kids quiet and in their places and suddenly in the midst of that, one voice shouted out, "Mommy and Daddy, I love you!!!!"

Everybody goes, "AWWWWWW! "

It was a boy's voice! All the men were thinking, "Where in the world did that come from?" It was in the chorus and you couldn't really see

who said it, but every parent there who had a boy said, "Yeah, that's my son!"

Now I want to ask you this question. A three- or four-year-old boy standing up here sees his mom and dad and shouts out, "Mommy and Daddy, I love you! " Did he say that because he wanted to get the right present for Christmas? Did he say it because he was trying to manipulate his parents or to get past something or to get over something? Absolutely not. He said it because he loves his Mom and Dad. He had the chance to say it.

What happens in *our* lives? What happens when something comes in and that enthusiasm and love just for the sake of love gets lost; and the things we start to do in our relationships and in our marriages and with our kids and parents and coworkers, become, "What can I get? How can I receive something back? How can I get over this?"

I've never in my entire life ever, ever met anyone who was "all in" for God who ever regretted it. I've met a lot of people who have said, "I'll try this, I'll test this, I'll experiment with this, and I'll see if God does this in this aspect of my life. I'll see if God handles this. But never in my life have I ever met anyone who was "all in" for God who ever came back and said, "You know I regretted it." Here's the amazing thing. All those folks who said, "I'm 'all in' for God," are people from whose lives, from a material or physical aspect or from their outside appearances, it might not seem that much had happened; but *everything* did [happen] because they made the decision, for whatever reason. They were happy being crazy. They tried everything else and how'd that work for them? They experimented with their own god, with other gods, they came back to this God, and finally they said, "I have done everything, I'm helpless and hopeless without being 'all in' for *this* God. "

So this word is just for the few of us today. I want to be in this group. I want to be "all in" for God. I don't want any more of my life- belief that there is a privilege due to some hint of merit in my life. I don't want to believe any more that my God is a God who can help me in some aspects of my life and that I can help myself in others . I want to be "all in" for God. And I believe there are some here who want this

as well. I don't want to be trite or simplistic, but I simply want to say today that if you want to be "all in" for God, if you will pray with me, it can happen.

I would like to just ask you to pray along with me in the words you want, affirm them by "Amen" or whatever, and let's pray.

Father, I thank you. I thank you that you are telling me today, and telling my family today and those gathered, "Go take it, no strings attaché. I always keep my promise." Lord, I have no idea what you are going to give me; I have no idea where you are going to take me. I have no idea where the sole of my foot will tread. It might lead even to a cross. Maybe even my own. But Lord, I want to live and claim the privilege of your love, which is lacking of any hint of merit in my life. I want to be "all in." I've tried it in so many different ways, Lord. I just want to be "all in." I want to remember a little girl two thousand years ago who was "all in" when she said, "My soul magnifies the Lord and my soul rejoices in you my Savior, for you have looked with favor on the lowliness of me, your servant."

And Lord I pray that you would remove from me and the lives of us who want to be "all in" any hint of what we think we want. I think, Lord, that the only thing that can save me in my life is for you to simply say, "Are you 'all in' or not? I'm not going to tell you what it is about." Then just open it up.

That's my prayer and I pray it is the prayer of some of my friends and family here. In the powerful name of Jesus, Amen.

I want to give a piece of advice for those who prayed that prayer. The nature of God's giving is this. In the book of Joshua there are two tenses that are used in understanding the word for "to give." The first is the perfect tense that means, "I have already given it to you." The next is the imperfect tense that means, "It is yet to be accomplished;" so I want to assure you that if you leave this place today and everything is changed, it is probably not God. But if you leave this place today and you know that everything is changed and it still seems the same, your growing into it is probably the assurance that it is Him. I know that doesn't make sense, but if you just live in

to that, it will make sense for you in your life. So keep in mind that what happens in our lives is what God desires. Our God says, "Go, take it-- no strings attached-- but take what I offer, take the way I offer it. Take it in ways that might not make any sense to you. Take it in ways that might mean humiliation or might mean whatever it is, but I always keep my promise."

And I can promise you that God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son for you.

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