

**Farewell Message**  
**By Phil Brainerd**  
**Presented to Trinity Church of Teaneck, NJ**  
**On Sunday, October 2, 2022**

**Introduction**

Way back in late 2004, My wife Rosie and I walked into a little church in Teaneck, NJ. It was called Trinity Evangelical Free Church.

We were married a few months earlier in March of that year, and we had moved to Fort Lee, just up the road a bit. We were impressed immediately with what a warm, friendly church it was. For all except three of the following years, we have been here, serving with this church in one form or another. Those other three years were spent helping a church over in Flushing that Rosie attended before we were married.



*Trinity Evangelical Free Church of Teaneck, NJ*

When we came back in 2009, we were told the church needed someone to help leading worship. I had served several times in other churches as a music director or choir leader or some such role with music, so we happily volunteered.

A few years later, an old friend asked me if I would help him out. He needed someone with my skills in his church southern New Jersey. A few days later, I mentioned that to pastor Steve Lorenz, the pastor at that time. The next Sunday, I was handed a paycheck and told that I was now on staff as the Music Director. So, I served in that capacity for a number of years.

In March of 2019, Rosie and I went on an anniversary weekend at the shore. We did some praying and thinking, and we felt led to start looking at something more line of pastoral ministry for me. Only two days later, we walked into the church leadership meeting. Pastor Lorenz surprised us all by announcing that he was ready to retire. A few months later, I became the senior pastor.

Then, recently, we got another call. So, we announced in August 2022, we're going to be moving on to Florida.

This is my last time to have the privilege of speaking from the pulpit as the senior pastor of this church. What do you say at times like this? One person asked if I was going to present a final sermon from our series in the book of Matthew. Some pastors would do that. I once heard a story of a pastor who was asked what he was going to speak on for Christmas. He replied, "We're in the book of Romans, so that's what I'm speaking on!" Then he added, "And what do

you think I'm speaking on for New Years?" Now, I believe firmly that the best sermon plan for a pastor is to work systematically through books of the Bible. However, I also think there's room to address special occasions. This (I think) is one of them.

Let's do this: We'll look at a time in the Scriptures when a leader spoke for the last time to his friends. One such occasion happened just after the days of Moses when Joshua realized he was at the end of his time as the leader of Israel. So, let's consider that. Let's look at what Joshua had to say to his friends when God called him to move on.

## **I. God Fights for Us**

1 After a long time had passed and the Lord had given Israel rest from all their enemies around them, Joshua, by then a very old man, 2 summoned all Israel—their elders, leaders, judges and officials—and said to them: "I am very old. 3 You yourselves have seen everything the Lord your God has done to all these nations for your sake; it was the Lord your God who fought for you. (Joshua 23:1-3)

In the course of this chapter and the next, the writer records a number of things that Joshua spoke to his friends. One of the things he spoke about was the victories that God gave to Israel against her enemies. And this theme is important:

"...it was the Lord your God who fought for you."

Let's take a moment to do what Joshua did for his friends. Let's review some of the things we've faced together since the time that God called me here.

When I first came pastor in 2019, the United States was enjoying good financial times. Gas prices were low. Interest rates on homes were low. The stock market was up. Everyone felt good. Then, COVID 19 hit. Before we knew it, things were happening that had never happened before in world history.

There have been sicknesses in the past. There have been diseases that have hit whole countries and even whole continents. They had names like Bubonic Plague, Black Death, Cholera, and Smallpox. In the twentieth century, we had the Spanish Flu. In all of these tragedies, people were slowed down and limited. But somehow, countries kept moving.

The outbreak of COVID 19 was the first time in history that the governments of the world responded by shutting down. In the past, those who contracted an illness were asked to quarantine. This was the first time that healthy people were commanded to lock themselves away. That resulted in a booming economy shutting down. The stock market began to fall. Businesses closed. Jobs were lost. Many of those business and jobs were never to return.

Then we were told that churches and other public meeting places were to close. At the start, it was only for two weeks. We only needed to “flatten the curve”. Mysteriously, two weeks grew into months.

During this time, something broke in the way that people relate to each other. And it has never healed. As I mentioned earlier, when Rosie and I first came here, we were struck with what a warm and friendly church this was. Everybody hugged each other. Everybody hung around after church for snacks. We had lunches and dinners. At one time in the church’s history, we had nice China that was brought out for special occasions. That’s how important it was to gather for all kinds of activities. Now, that wonderful quality of church life was handicapped.

During my ministry here, I’ve mentioned several times that my life as a Christian was marked by personal contact with leaders. When I was a brand-new Christian, a mature church leader met with me to mentor me. We met every week. I was taught that this was how Jesus had such a great impact on the world. He started with a small group of people and spent lots of quality time with them. I was taught that this is how good pastors ran their churches. You try to present good sermons, of course. But, you also spend a lot of time meeting with people as individuals. To do this, Rosie and I put together a plan where we would try to meet with a family in the church as often as once a week until we visited everyone. All of that ended with COVID 19.

And it wasn’t just our church - It was everyone. And here was the result: Just as businesses were failing, so did many churches.

But you know something? ***Our church did not fail. Our church did not die.*** You know why? I believe we survived for the same reason that the children of Israel survived when they were attacked by her enemies: Because the Lord our God fought for us. He defended us. He protected us. He allowed us to continue when others ceased.

Here’s a question: Why did he help us when others failed? I can only say I believe that there is something special here. It’s something that God has given us. It is not something we should take credit for. We should not brag about it. It is the gift of God’s grace. God has a special purpose for this church, and he’s not done with it yet.

Everyone who attends and everyone who joins needs to understand this. I repeat: God has a plan for this church. Will it last forever? Probably not, because no church lasts forever. But for now, I think we can assume that God has things he wants to do through this one.

So we must remember what Joshua told his friends: It is the Lord who goes before us to fight our battles. It is the Lord who defends us. We can rely on him. We can trust him.

## II. God Has Spoken to Us

What else did Joshua say to his friends? Let's read on.

6 "Be very strong; be careful to obey all that is written in the Book of the Law of Moses, without turning aside to the right or to the left. (Joshua 23:6)

Look at that: "...obey all that is written"

Joshua reminded his friends that they had received a very special gift. The One True God, the Creator of the heavens and the earth, had spoken to them through Moses. God did not speak to any other nation the way he spoke to Israel - And he did not speak to any other person the way he spoke to Moses. The words God spoke to Moses were compiled into books. Joshua warned his friends to make sure they obeyed everything in that collection of writings.

Now, in order to obey those words, people had to know what they were. That meant learning the words. Today, we have a much greater revelation from God: We have the entire writings of the Bible. And the encouragement is the same - We must learn the words of Scripture. We must learn them well.

It may be harder to learn everything, because there are a lot more words today than in the days of Moses. On the other hand, although there are more words to learn than in the days of Joshua, access to the writings has become much easier. The Bible is still the most published book in history. It's available in hundreds of languages, many with multiple translations. It's recorded. It's videotaped. It's broadcasted. And now with the Internet, it's streamed.

It's never been easier to access the Word of God. This is a wonderful gift from God to our world. I hope that we will strive to learn it. And I hope we will obey what we learn.

## III. God Is Superior to all the other False 'gods'.

What else did Joshua have to say? Joshua reminded his friends that their ancestors came from lands that worshipped idols. They had been rescued from the land of Egypt, where the residents worshipped false gods. And so, Joshua challenged them with one of the best-known statements in the Bible.

14 "Now fear the Lord and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your ancestors worshiped beyond the Euphrates River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. 15 But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord." (Joshua 24:14-15)

Let's consider those words: "choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve"

Joshua's final challenge to his friends is to consider who's better: The God of Israel, or the gods of the surrounding nations.

Let's compare them, the God of Israel and the idols: The God of Israel is real, the others are fake. You could stop there. The true God has everything needed to create and maintain the heavens and the earth. Infinite power, infinite knowledge, and Omnipresence. He has those things and much, much more. Add to all this, the true God is the God of love. He loves his children. The other gods are all just representations of a being named the Devil who hates us all.

During my time here at Trinity Church, we've discussed this at length. At one time, idols were pieces of wood and metal. Today, the idols are more abstract things like money, power, and pleasure. But the concept is the same. Whatever form they take, the idols are all the things that distract us from giving wholehearted devotion to the One True God.

The One True God, the God of Israel, is far superior to anything else on this earth. I hope that we will follow the advice of Joshua and choose to serve him.

#### **IV. God is the God of Grace.**

And finally, there is one thing that Joshua did not know. He had the first five books of the Bible, and maybe some other writings of his day. We have the New Testament - The writings of the followers of Jesus Christ.

Here is one of the most important things they had to say.

For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. (John 1:17)

Grace. Grace was not new to followers of God. However, Jesus and his followers made it clear. Law says we follow God because he will reward us if we do, **and he will punish us if we don't.** Grace says, Jesus died for our sins. He paid the price for all the times we broke the law. He was perfect when we fell short. When we made a righteous God angry, Jesus allowed that anger to be poured out on himself on the cross. Because of all this, the Apostle Paul could write:

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1)

If you have called upon Jesus Christ to save you, there is no longer any penalty for your sins. God will never be angry at you. You will never be punished.

Here's what this does for us: When we obey God, we don't do it because we will be punished if we don't. There is only reward if we do obey. That's grace.

Rather than fear punishment, every time we choose to obey God, we have the opportunity to become like him, and to know him better. That's grace.

Joshua challenged his friends to obey God's Word. When we read God's Word, we don't do it because God will punish us if we don't. We read God's Word because we meet God there. He opens his heart and his mind to us. We learn more and more of his love for us. And we grow in our love for him. That's grace.

Under grace, we can ask the question, "What is the greatest of the commandments?", and Jesus can answer:

"The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."  
(Mark 12:29-31)

God has opened our eyes to see that there is one true God, and it's the God of the Bible. That's grace.

We can serve because we love the Lord our God with all our heart and all our soul and all our mind and with all our strength, not because we'll be punished. That's grace.

We can serve our neighbor because we love them as we love ourselves. That's grace.

Let's pull this all together.

## **Conclusion**

Eighteen years ago, Rosie and I came to Trinity Church. Now, it's time to go. Leaving can be sad, because we'll miss each other.

But don't worry about us. When we go, we know that God goes before us. He will continue to do what he has done for his children for centuries. He will go ahead of us and fight our battles for us. As long as God has a plan for us, we will have what we need. He will give us his Word so we can know him better and better each day. We will try with his help to choose him over and over and over again, in spite of the fact that our world is filled with idols. We will be able to do all this because of God's grace. So don't worry for us.

And we won't worry for you because we know that all of this is true for you as well. We know that he will give all of you help if you will ask.

We go, leaving all of you in the hands of the One True God.

I hope that you will all choose to follow, day after day, the One True God: The God who fights for us. The God who gives us his Word. The God who is far superior to anything this world has to offer. The God of Grace.

That's what Joshua hoped for all his friends. And that's what we hope for all of you.

May the Lord bless you all richly.

---

Thanks for reading! Here are some helpful links:

Trinity Church of Teaneck, NJ

[TrinityTeaneck.org](http://TrinityTeaneck.org)

Phil's Site:

[PhilBrainerd.com](http://PhilBrainerd.com)

To learn how to begin a new life with Jesus Christ, visit Billy Graham's site:

[PeaceWithGod.net](http://PeaceWithGod.net)

---