

A HARD ACT TO FOLLOW

Joshua - The Adventure and Victory of Faith

by Doug Goins

Last Wednesday evening on ESPN I saw Cal Ripken, Jr. break Lou Gehrig's record by playing in 2,131 consecutive baseball games, never missing a day of work for more than fourteen years. That record had stood since the 1920s. It's an amazing athletic achievement that probably will never ever again be duplicated in modern baseball. One of the things that made Ripken's feat so attractive to everyone is the fact that he is a genuinely good man, a man of integrity who has an amazing work ethic. But in light of Cal Ripken's amazing feat, let me ask if you know the name Manny Alexander. He is the Triple-A shortstop who is being groomed by the Baltimore Orioles organization to replace Cal Ripken when Cal's string runs out. At that time Manny Alexander will have to replace a legend, a giant. Cal Ripken, Jr. will be a hard act to follow.

Our present pastoral staff and elders at PBC can identify with Manny Alexander, because we were chosen to succeed some very distinguished and godly leaders of our church and carry on the work that they began. We have a sense of walking in the shadows of giants as we recall the lives and effective ministries of Charlie Luce, Bob Roe, Ray Stedman, Bob Smith, and others. In some ways it isn't easy to follow well-known, beloved Christian leaders who have sacrificially poured their lives into successful ministries for years. They can be hard acts to follow.

Seventeen years ago I showed up here feeling like a raw recruit in contrast to all the seasoned veterans around me. I really had a sense that I needed all the help I could get. The patriarchs of this church were very encouraging to me and assured me of their prayerful support. That helpful advocacy continued throughout the years. Thank God that Charlie Luce and Bob Roe are still encouraging me. When you feel like a midget taking the place of a giant, you appreciate all the encouragement that God can provide.

In this message we're going to identify with Joshua in the opening section of this book as he is called to step into Moses' sandals. The word courage, which is the root of the word encouragement, is found three times in this section and is the heart of the passage. In Joshua 1:6, God says to Joshua, "Be strong and of good courage...." In the next verse as well he says, "Only be strong and very courageous...." And then in verse 9 he says, "... Be strong and of good courage...." What a new leader needs is not advice from the old-timers but encouragement more than anything else. The New Testament verb to encourage literally means "to put heart into," or to help put courage into someone's heart so that they'll have a brave, strong, fearless heart.

As God's people today, we face challenges that God gives each of us, in varying degrees of spiritual responsibility or leadership according to his calling in our families, in the workplace, in our neighborhoods, in the schools we're involved in, perhaps in outreach ministries or ministries within the church. Whatever our calling, we need to hear the words of our text today. We need to have heart put into us by these wonderfully encouraging words of life in Joshua 1:1-9.

In these verses God speaks directly to Joshua, his chosen leader for Israel, and encourages him in four ways. First, in 1:1,2 God encourages Joshua in his personal calling or commissioning. Second, in 1:3-6 he encourages Joshua in his promises for the future, which are absolute guarantees of how things will turn out. Third, in 1:7,8 he encourages Joshua with his written word that he gave to Moses. And fourth, in 1:9 he encourages Joshua, strangely enough, through a direct command.

Verses 1 and 2:

After the death of Moses the servant of the LORD, the LORD said to Joshua the son of Nun, Moses' minister, "Moses my servant is dead; now therefore

arise, go over this Jordan, you and all this people, into the land which I am giving to them, to the people of Israel.

Even godly leaders like Moses don't lead forever. There comes a time in every ministry when God calls for a new beginning with a new generation and new leadership. With the exception of Joshua and Caleb, the old generation of Jews had all died during the forty years of wandering in the wilderness, and Joshua was commissioned to lead this new generation into a new challenge that he had never faced before---entering and conquering the promised land.

I remember being in London and seeing the grave of John Wesley, the great English revivalist of the 1700s and founder of Methodism. There is a plaque on his grave that says, "God buries his workmen, but his work goes on." It was God who had chosen Joshua, and everyone in Israel knew that he was their new leader.

Last week we read in Deuteronomy 31 the account of how Moses publicly passed the mantle of leadership to Joshua. Those of us in pastor and elder leadership here at PBC now remember with deep gratitude the ringing endorsement that Ray Stedman gave us in his final preaching series here at PBC. I remember Ray saying, "I love these guys, they are God's men, and I trust them for the spiritual leadership and the teaching responsibility of this church." Moses believed in Joshua, and Ray Stedman believed in a lot of us. Oswald Sanders wrote in his book *Spiritual Leadership*, "A work originated by God and conducted on spiritual principles will surmount the shock of a change of leadership, and indeed will probably thrive better as a result."

Wise leadership does not abandon the past. You work at maintaining continuity, building on the past while moving into the future. I said in the last message that Moses is mentioned fifty-seven times in the book of Joshua. That is evidence of Joshua's deep respect for Moses and his gratitude for what Moses had done for Israel. Joshua worshiped the same God that Moses worshiped and obeyed the same word of God that Moses had given to the nation. But that doesn't mean that there has to be personal conformity from one leader to the next, because every leader is different in gifts, temperament, style, and personality; and we really are free to maintain our individuality as men and women of God.

I just watched a video from Mount Hermon Christian Conference Center commemorating their ninetieth anniversary. I was struck by the continuity of mission, focus, and the spiritual principles that direct that place: the supremacy of Jesus Christ and absolute confidence in the word of God. These things have never changed at Mount Hermon. It was very moving for me. And yet I saw a succession of faces move through the ninety years, from old black-and-white photos from the turn of the century to modern videotape footage. God raised up person after person to give leadership to that place: Bill Gwinn in the fifties, sixties and seventies; Ed Hayes in the eighties and nineties; and now Roger Williams. Each of them has had the clear sense that God called them to that particular ministry. It's a great encouragement to know that God cares, calls, and is committed to what he wants us to do.

Twice in the first two verses, Moses is called the Lord's servant. At the end of the book, Joshua himself will be called the servant of the Lord. Here he is called the son of Nun, the servant or minister of Moses. Ultimately, the important thing is never the servant in the ministry; it's the divine Master who controls and guides and directs, whoever the servants are. The term "minister of Moses" (verse 1) defined a personal assistant to a leader. The same word was also used to define the workers in the tabernacle who served the Levites in worship. It was clearly a title of subservience, of submission to authority. Joshua spent forty years under Moses' leadership learning how to obey as a servant, as a man under discipline, before he commanded as a general. He was first a servant, and then God made him a leader. That servanthood continued in his style of leadership for the next twenty-five years as he led the people in conquest. He led as a servant.

God commissioned Joshua to do three things: to lead the people into the land; to defeat the enemies they would face in all the fortified cities, all the Canaanite tribes in the land; and to claim the inheritance of the land. God could have chosen some supernatural means to accomplish these things, such as sending an angel. But he chose a person just like us, and he promised to give that person the power he would need to get the job done.

Joshua himself is a type of Jesus Christ. Hebrews 2:10 calls Jesus the captain of our salvation. He has already

won the ultimate victory over sin and death and hell. And now Jesus leads us in triumph through our own battles to possess the land. He shares the spiritual resources of his inheritance with us. He gives us his spiritual blessings---everything we need to follow in obedience to God's call in our lives.

God's second encouragement to Joshua comes in the form of promises in 1:3-6. God has given Joshua this three-fold task to perform, so he gives Joshua three promises to go with each of those responsibilities. First, he promises that they will enter the land; they will cross the Jordan. Second, he promises that they will defeat the enemies who confront them. And third, he promises that the land will be apportioned as their inheritance, and as part of that the people will trust Joshua's leadership. It struck me as I was reading and rereading this that God doesn't give Joshua any explanation as to how he will accomplish these things. We as God's people have to learn to live on promises and not on explanations, to walk by faith instead of by sight. When we trust God's promises and step out by faith, we can be sure that the Lord will give the practical, physical directions when we need them. He knows, we don't.

Verses 3 and 4 begin with the physical act of stepping out by faith:

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 this Lebanon as far as the great river, the river Euphrates, all the land of the Hittites to the Great Sea toward the going down of the sun shall be your territory.

As we saw in the last message, God reaffirmed this promise for centuries, from his first recorded word to Abraham (then called Abram) in Genesis 12 to his last words to Moses. You can look at Deuteronomy 34 and see God taking Moses up to the top of Mount Nebo to look into the land and see all the same territory. God said to Moses, "I promised it to Abraham. I'm going to give it to the people. You won't be able to cross over because of disobedience in your life, but a new generation of the people will cross over and will enter." God will take them across the Jordan into enemy territory. He will enable them to claim for themselves the land that he has promised them. That gift we talked about in the last message will be received by the people. There will be no repetition of the fear and unbelief that brought the nation to spiritual defeat at Kadesh-Barnea forty years earlier.

God has already given them the land, but it is their responsibility now to put one foot in front of the other and start taking the territory, to step out in faith and claim it. When Abraham first came into the land, the exact same dynamic was called for. Listen to God's word to him: "Lift up your eyes, and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward; for all the land which you see I will give to you and to your descendants for ever...Arise, walk the length and the breadth of the land, for I will give it to you" (Genesis 13:14b-15, 17).

There is an important lesson for us today in all of this. God has given us all spiritual blessings in Christ Jesus (see Ephesians 1), and we must step out by faith to claim those blessings. The apostle John was writing to the first-century Christians in the city of Philadelphia in Turkey about stepping out, about walking into the land: "I know your deeds. Behold, I have put before you an open door [a door of opportunity to walk through], a door which no one can shut. You have little power, but you have kept my word, you have not denied my name" (Revelation 3:8). Jesus, speaking through John, is saying, "I know you're not that great. You can't smash doors open and force your way in anywhere. And you shouldn't. But when God opens doors before you, choose to walk through them."

The Lord has set before each of us in his church an open door that nobody can close. We are called to walk through that door by faith, to claim new territory for the Lord. Perhaps it's in a tough family situation that you have to claim new territory. Maybe it's in the workplace---an especially difficult relationship that you need to face into, or a challenge that you've been given that you don't feel capable of meeting. Maybe it's something at school, if you're a student. Maybe it's a ministry that you're starting here at PBC or somewhere else in your community. We must walk into these things.

It's impossible to stand still in Christian life and ministry; if we idle in neutral, we start sliding backward, losing ground. There is a call in Hebrews 6:1: "Let us...go on...." In this short, clipped command, the call is to go on from spiritual immaturity to maturity, to go on from always being fed by Bible teachers to becoming those who understand and can handle and teach the word of God. It means moving ahead into new territory.

I have a good friend at PBC whom I knew as an undergraduate and then as a grad student. Now he's married and part of our church family. He and his wife have always given their lives away in the Scriptures, in compassion, in hospitality. Then they decided to rest for a year, which was appropriate. But he told me last week, "You know, we've got to get moving again. I've been sitting still long enough. I've got to start using my gifts." He understands the principle that you start looking for opportunities to walk into, opportunities to serve. And he's serving in the confidence that God will go before him and make whatever he does effective, from God's perspective.

Look at verse 5, where God promises victory over the enemy:

No man shall be able to stand before 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.

God had told Abraham in the very beginning, back in Genesis 12, that other nations were inhabiting the promised land, and he repeated that fact to Moses. If Israel obeyed the Lord, God promised that he would defeat those nations through their efforts in warfare. But he warned his people not to compromise with the enemy in any way. They might win a war or a battle, but if they deviated from what God required from them, they would lose the ultimate victory that God intended for them.

In the middle of that calling to battle and the promise that the battle would be won, there is this amazing, wonderful promise of God's presence and power: "...As I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will not fail you or forsake you." God's commitment of his presence and power to always be with us is powerfully encouraging, and it never changes. God made the same promise to Jacob (see Genesis 28:5): "...Behold, I am with you, and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." In Deuteronomy 31 God made the identical promise to Joshua. Now God is saying it again to him. The promise will be repeated one day to the fearful Gideon, hiding in a winepress. David will repeat the promise to his son Solomon. It will be repeated again to the Jewish exiles returning from Babylon to their homeland.

Best of all, God has made the identical promise to us as his people today. Remember, the gospel of Matthew opens with the promise of Emmanuel, "God with us." And it concludes with the Lord Jesus' saying to us, "...Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Hebrews 13:5, as we saw in the last message, quotes this verse in Joshua; that New Testament writer applies this truth to us as Christians today in very practical areas of our lives. What all of this means for us as God's people is that we can keep moving forward into God's will. We can be absolutely assured of God's presence and power. We can claim the great news of Romans 8:31: "If God is for us, who is against us?" There is no opposition that God can't or won't take us through.

The third promise, in verse 6, is that the people will trust Joshua's leadership, and the land will get divided up:

Be strong and of good courage; for you shall cause this people to inherit the land which I swore to their fathers to give them.

It starts with a clear command: Be strong and courageous. This imperative that God issues to Joshua, this call to courageous, obedient leadership, is based on the absolute certainty of God's promise. The grounds for whatever courage Joshua might have aren't in himself, but in the powerful encouragement that God will be with his people as they enter the land and as they trust Joshua's leadership. The enemy will be defeated. Israel will possess the land. God will keep his promise to Abraham that his descendants will inherit the land.

As we study through this book together, we will see each one of these promises fulfilled. Chapters 2-5 record entering the land, crossing the Jordan River, and celebrating Passover at Gilgal. Chapters 6-12 record battle after battle in which God fights on behalf of his people and the battles are won. And in chapters 13-22 the land is divided up, the tribes are settled, and there is peace in the land as the inheritance is given. In Joshua 23:14 Joshua speaks to the leaders of the nation at the end of his life before he is about to die: "And now I am about to go the way of all the earth, and you know in your hearts and souls, all of you, that not one thing has failed of all the good things which the LORD your God promised concerning you; all have come to pass for you, not

one of them has failed." God keeps his promises.

As part of God's fulfilling his promises, Joshua was called to exercise faith through strong and courageous leadership. Divine sovereignty always expresses itself through human response. God first speaks the word of promise, the indicative statement about who he is and what he'll do; and then that encourages us as his servants to believe, step out, trust, and obey. Joshua wasn't to use these guaranteed certainties as a reason to kick back and wait to see what God would do. No, the promise of effectiveness was powerfully motivational for Joshua, encouraging him to purposeful activity.

The promises of God's presence and activity are fantastic. God is saying to you and me through these verses, "I won't drop you in the middle of a project that I've given to you." God is not in the business of deserting his people when we get in trouble if we're honestly endeavoring to do his will. God does close doors, and this promise of his power and presence doesn't preclude disaster, persecution, struggle, or difficulty. Our faith will be tested, we may suffer, our lives will be very hard at times---the work is tough. But God's power will be with us through the good and bad times, and his presence will continually sustain us. Life won't be easy for Joshua, but we're going to see him claim God's power and presence through both bad and good times.

Third, God encourages Joshua through the written word. Look at verses 7 and 8:

Only be strong and very courageous, being careful to do according to all the law which Moses my servant commanded you; turn not from it to the right hand or to the left, that you may have good success wherever you go. This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it; for then you shall make your way prosperous, and then you shall have good success.

It's one thing to say to a leader, "Be strong and courageous." It's quite something else to enable him or her to do it. Joshua's strength and courage will come from meditating on the word of God, from believing the promises in it, from living in obedience to its precepts. Moses gave this same counsel to the entire nation back in Deuteronomy 11 almost word-for-word. But now God is applying it specifically to Joshua.

What is "all the law," mentioned in verse 7, and "the book of the law," mentioned in verse 8? During the years of his leadership of the nation, Moses compiled a written, historical record of God's activity among the people from creation history through the history of the patriarchs to Moses' contemporary setting with the people. Throughout the forty years in the wilderness Moses kept adding material to this record until finally it included everything that God wanted in it. It became the entire five books of Moses---Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy---the Pentateuch. It was the greatest legacy that Moses could have left to his successor.

Deuteronomy 31 talks about Moses' completing the book and of his committing it to the care of the priests, but it wasn't enough that the priests carried it around and protected it. No, Joshua had to take the time to read it every single day, to make it a part of his inner person by meditating on it.

The Hebrew word for meditate is interesting---it means to mutter. We mutter under our breath, talk to ourselves, interact with issues. I think of the practice of the Jews even today who read the Scriptures aloud to themselves. You can see them at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, repeating the Scriptures aloud to the Lord and to themselves. The Jewish people even to this day love to discuss the Scriptures with each other and debate over Torah. That explains God's warning to Joshua here in verse 8 to not allow the book of the law to depart out of his mouth. There is a sense in which we are to engage in dialogue with our Bibles, and that goes way beyond a casual reading through the One Year Bible, or hearing a sermon once a week, or even being passively involved in some group Bible study on a weekly basis. This is talking to our Bibles. This image is of soaking in the Scriptures---intense, regular, personal engagement with the Scriptures---with the desire not just to gain information for its own sake, but to be guided and directed and controlled by God's revelation. We want it to keep us from wandering off in the wrong direction, from turning to the right hand or to the left, in the words of our text. We want it to enable us to succeed in the things that God desires for us.

That word success appears twice in those two verses. The word prosperity appears once. Somebody asked me after church last Sunday about the material issues like the land, abundant crops, and healthy babies and cattle. What does the Bible teach about prosperity? In our lives as Christians, success and prosperity are not to be measured by the physical, material standards of the world. The issue for us is spiritual blessing; spiritual prosperity.

We can choose to set out on our own to become materially successful. In the words of our text, that would be turning to the right hand or to the left. But the reality is that we can achieve the goal and live to regret it. There are some famous words by George MacDonald, the Scottish novelist and Christian apologist: "In whatever a man does without God, he must fail miserably or succeed more miserably." It is possible to know physical and material success and yet be an absolute failure spiritually. Meditating on the Scriptures will help us evaluate our motives in decision-making with regard to success and prosperity. We will learn to ask ourselves the right questions out of the word of God. Am I totally committed to the will of God in this action, this choice, this endeavor? Am I relying completely on the Spirit of God to empower me, or am I trusting my own resources? Am I serving the glory of God ultimately? If I can answer those questions with a yes, then my ministry, my activity, my relationships will be successful in God's eyes, no matter what people think and no matter what the physical, material outcome is.

I have a dear friend at PBC whom I've known for twenty-five years. There is nobody else I've ever known who more literally meditates on the word of God, who soaks in it. One of his consistent sayings is "I've been reflecting" on a spiritual truth by reading and rereading the word of God. He and I were in a Bible study together on marriage and creation and spirituality and sexuality. So we had this month-long dialogue, giving each other passages of Scripture. Last Sunday morning at our church family's fellowship time he came in and said, "I read the passage in 1 Timothy about marriage, and I decided that I need to read everything Paul wrote on marriage. So I took the hours to do that. Then my wife and I spent a couple of hours talking about what the Bible says about marriage." I was at a party with this man last week, and he swam across the pool and said, "Let's keep talking about what God's word says about marriage and about male and female." That's what this passage is calling us to live like, so that we think biblically, reading and soaking in and reflecting on the word of God. And I am very grateful for this dear friend and brother who challenges me constantly to that kind of lifestyle.

The last encouragement God gives to Joshua is in verse 9, and it's the encouragement of a direct command. God asks rhetorically:

Have I not commanded you? Be strong and of good courage; be not frightened, neither be dismayed; for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go."

The commands that God gives us out of his word are always his enablements. They have within them the power to be fulfilled. We are able to obey his commands because he commits himself to accomplishing those things in and through us.

I love the words of the angel Gabriel to Mary when he appeared to her and told her about how God wanted her to give birth to the Savior of the world, and she asked the very logical question, "How can an unwed teenage girl get pregnant?" Gabriel's response was this (American Standard Version, 1901): "For no word from God shall be void of power." The very word that God speaks has in it the power of fulfillment. Our call is to trust God's word and walk in obedience to it.

The apostle Paul in Philippians 2:12-13 says in a beautiful way the same thing about the commands of God being fulfilled by the commitment of God. He says, "So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure." There is the command, and there is the promise of fulfillment of the command in us and through us. Sanctification is a tough process; there is effort involved. But we struggle in the confidence that God is already working in us to make us into what pleases him. That's what we want, and that's what he is committed to accomplishing in us.

For Joshua, in the twenty-five years that are to come, whenever he faces enemy opposition and is tempted to be afraid, he will remember that he has been personally commissioned by the Lord who promised all the resources necessary to fulfill the task. Whenever things go wrong---and they will---and he is tempted to be dismayed and anxious, he can claim the presence and power of the God who commanded him and the influence of the word of that God. We will see Joshua take new courage. He will allow the encouragement of God to change him over and over again.

What are you being called of God to arise and do today? What obedience to truth is required of you? How has God personally commissioned you to serve him and his people? Is there someone in whose giant shadow you will be serving, a loved leader you're being asked to follow, perhaps as a Sunday School teacher, staff person, or whatever? I talked to a woman this week who is being called of God to stepmother a family of children who desperately need to be loved, and she doesn't feel at all adequate for that calling from God. If none of these questions connects with you, then you have a different issue to deal with. It might mean that you're idling in neutral---gradually sliding backward, losing ground. Perhaps the call to you is to stand up and step out. Maybe it means saying, "Okay, Lord, what do you want me to do? What do you want me to possess? What do you want me to move into?" I pray that you're encouraged by this text, that it strengthens you and gives you a brave heart.

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