

A Call to Courage Ahead of a Daunting Mission

Joshua 1

Suppose the highest ranking general in the Marine Corp handpicked you to take his place. But even as you are being appointed to this leadership role, the statement is made in your presence—“He is irreplaceable. There will never be another like him.” Furthermore, you know by your own experience that what they are saying is absolutely true. You have worked side by side, day after day with the previous general. You witnessed up close his leadership ability, wisdom, strength, and courage under fire. Being a believer like you, you also observed firsthand his tremendous faith in God. Considering all this, you don’t think that there is any way that you can measure up to this man in any respect! No matter how much the board who appointed you to this role tries to reassure you of their confidence in you to do the job, the awesome reality of the previous man’s track record is always there right in front of you.

On top of the stellar reputation of your predecessor, when you take the helm, there is certain conflict ahead not with a middle east country, but with one of the other super powers of the world. To make matters even more intimidating, the previous generation of marines under your predecessor had a reputation for being unpredictable, and at times, outright rebellious. The generation of marines under your command is new and different than the previous one, but they are relatively untrained and untested. How would you feel?

I wonder how Joshua felt having to take Moses’ place? Moses is the one of whom it was recorded in the closing verses of Deuteronomy- “Since then, no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom he LORD knew face to face, who did all those miraculous signs and wonders the LORD sent him to do in Egypt—to Pharaoh and to all his officials and to his whole land. For no one has ever shown the mighty power or performed the awesome deeds that Moses did in the sight of all Israel.”

On top of any intimidation Joshua might have felt due to the success of his predecessor were the memories of how fickle and at times rebellious the previous generation of Israel had been. Joshua will lead this generation’s kids, they are a different group, but they haven’t yet been tested.

On top of all of these factors remember, the Promised Land is full of giants. How would the people of Israel respond to the enemy this time?

In the face of all of these frightening circumstances, Joshua will successfully lead Israel into the Promised Land. How is Joshua able to face the daunting mission God gave him with the strength and courage he displays? So many times we hear of fear paralyzing or handicapping God’s people from accomplishing His will. Why is Joshua different? Before investigating the Source of Joshua’s strength and courage, let’s review briefly the book of Joshua as a whole.

Joshua is an important bridge book between the writings of Moses, the first five books of the Old Testament, and the historical books of the Old Testament. The book of Deuteronomy ends announcing the death of Moses. The book of Joshua begins where Deuteronomy leaves off introducing the transition of leadership from Moses to Joshua.

A simple outline of the book of Joshua:

Joshua 1-5-Invasion of the Promised Land

Joshua 6-12-Conquest of the Promised Land

Joshua 13-22-Division of the Promised Land

Joshua 23-24-Joshua's Farewell Address

A summary of the purposes for which Joshua was written:

Joshua's historical purpose is to reveal the events God used to bring Israel into the Promised Land, to conquer the pagan Canaanites residing in the land, and to distribute the land to each tribe and family of Israel.

Joshua's theological purpose is to reveal God's character. The book reveals God's holiness, His power and sovereignty, His love, and His faithfulness. The book of Joshua demonstrates the faithfulness of God in fulfilling His covenant with Israel by establishing them in the land promised them.

Joshua also reveals much about the character of God's covenant people. They are often times a disobedient people. His choice of them and love for them is clearly not on the basis of their merit. While much of this book records Israel's success in battle as the nation is faithful to trust and obey God, there is also much it records about the nation's failures. For example, as the land is being distributed, it is noted how the tribes of Israel failed to remove this or that people group. In spite of God's provision of all the needs of His people and in spite of His complete faithfulness, they are unfaithful and because of it, they will enjoy God's promises partially, but not fully. In spite of all of Israel's failure, because the Covenant depends on God's faithfulness, God's promises are sure and will be completely fulfilled in the future. His faithfulness is demonstrated in the book of Joshua and will be demonstrated again when His promise to give Israel the land He promised is finally and fully fulfilled in the end times.

Joshua's commissioning & marching orders (Joshua 1:1-9)

Moses is dead and it's time for Joshua to lead (1:1-2a)

Moses died and was buried by God where the people couldn't find him. God doesn't want Israel going back to his grave. It's time to move on with Joshua. Moses is gone, but God's plan and promises for Israel are very much alive. They haven't changed. God is going to pick up with Joshua, working out His plan for Israel through him as He did through Moses. All that happened in Israel's history under Moses' leadership wasn't about Moses just as all that would happen under Joshua's leadership wouldn't be about Joshua either. All the events that take place under Joshua's leadership aren't primarily about him, but about God and His faithfulness to keep His covenant promise.

A promise delayed is not a promise denied. It had been centuries since God first gave the promise of the Land to Abraham. Those centuries saw the sojourning of the patriarchs, Israel's harsh slavery in Egypt, the miraculous Exodus, the covenant-making at Mount Sinai, and the wilderness wanderings. Time might pass and circumstances might come which make it unclear as to how God will fulfill His promises, but mark this—God is a covenant keeping God. He will do as He promised.

Joshua receives orders to lead God's people in taking possession of God's gift (1:2b-4)

Joshua and all Israel are to cross the Jordan into the land described as “the land I am about to give to them.” This land is the generous gift of the LORD. The LORD describes for Joshua the borders of the Promised Land which show it to be a vast, huge provision of God. Wherever Joshua sets foot, he will never leave its parameters.

God promises Joshua His abiding presence (1:5)

Whenever God gives us a task, He is faithful to provide the resources we need to carry it out. Certainly Joshua needed assurance of God's provision. He needs encouragement and guidance for the daunting task ahead of him. Why is leading Israel into the Promised Land such a terrifying mission? Joshua is filling Moses' shoes—a great predecessor in leadership. As Moses' aide, he learned it wasn't easy leading Israel around. Considering all the difficulty Moses had, how would they ever listen to him? And, of course, the enemies in the Promised Land are giants!

In order to encourage and prepare Joshua for what is ahead, God promises to be present with him. Joshua could count on His help and assistance in coming battles. As God was with Moses, so would he be with Joshua. This would have been reassuring to Joshua. Joshua knew what it would be like to have God present with Him—He had seen it personally when serving alongside Moses as his aide.

Joshua would be an invincible, unstoppable fighter. All the opposition against him will come to naught. No one will be able to stand against him all of the days of his life. This invincibility won't be due to human strength, superior technology or weaponry, nor to speed and agility. Rather, it will come from the presence of God Almighty with Joshua.

Not only would God be present with Joshua, but he is also assured that God's presence will not be revoked. He promises never to leave or forsake Joshua. God's presence will be constant. By the way, God has made the same promise to us (Hebrews 13:5; Matthew 28:20)

God calls Joshua to be brave and strong (1:6-9)

For Joshua's part, the LORD instructs him to be strong and courageous. God repeats this instruction three times. Joshua must not allow himself to become terrified or discouraged. Fear and despair must be given no place in Joshua's heart. How many times has fear of the enemy or fear of failure or fear of the opinions of other people or fear of death kept God's people from doing what He commands? God calls on Joshua to respond in strength and bravery instead of succumbing to such fears.

Why is it so important for Joshua to be strong and brave? Robert Hubbard writes, "The danger is that fears, feelings of inadequacy, and doubts may cripple *Joshua's* (the leader's) resolve, muddle his mind, and shake his confidence. The resulting confusion, wavering, and tentativeness *would* sow despair, if not dissent, among the followers and endanger the mission. The temptation, then, is to back off from risks, to strike compromises, or to retreat altogether."

Joshua needs to control his fears as he anticipates the dangers and challenges ahead, so as to execute his mission fully. He needs to be steady, resolute, bold and unafraid, but how under the circumstances? Again, God provides that which will enable Joshua to give such a response. He is the source of Joshua's strength and courage.

Be strong and courageous remembering God's promise

God swore to the forefathers of Israel that He would give them the land they are about to inherit. As Joshua remembered what God promised, it would give rise to a response of strength and courage when frightening circumstances came his way.

Be strong and courageous making His Word a priority

As Joshua gave priority to the Word of God and acted strictly according to the whole law of Moses, it would give rise to a response of strength and courage. In the Word, he would be reminded of God's faithfulness to Israel in the past. In the Word, he would be reminded of God's promises for the future. In the Word, he would be reminded of the requirements of a holy and righteous God for life in the present if His covenant people are to experience His blessings.

In the Word, Joshua would read:

Exodus 23:20-33- “See, I am sending an angel ahead of you to guard you along the way and to bring you to the place I have prepared. ²¹ Pay attention to him and listen to what he says. Do not rebel against him; he will not forgive your rebellion, since my Name is in him. ²² If you listen carefully to what he says and do all that I say, I will be an enemy to your enemies and will oppose those who oppose you. ²³ My angel will go ahead of you and bring you into the land of the Amorites, Hittites, Perizzites, Canaanites, Hivites and Jebusites, and I will wipe them out. ²⁴ Do not bow down before their gods or worship them or follow their practices. You must demolish them and break their sacred stones to pieces. ²⁵ Worship the LORD your God, and his blessing will be on your food and water. I will take away sickness from among you, ²⁶ and none will miscarry or be barren in your land. I will give you a full life span. ²⁷ “I will send my terror ahead of you and throw into confusion every nation you encounter. I will make all your enemies turn their backs and run. ²⁸ I will send the hornet ahead of you to drive the Hivites, Canaanites and Hittites out of your way. ²⁹ But I will not drive them out in a single year, because the land would become desolate and the wild animals too numerous for you. ³⁰ Little by little I will drive them out before you, until you have increased enough to take possession of the land. ³¹ “I will establish your borders from the Red Sea to the Sea of the Philistines, and from the desert to the River. I will hand over to you the people who live in the land and you will drive them out before you. ³² Do not make a covenant with them or with their gods. ³³ Do not let them live in your land, or they will cause you to sin against me, because the worship of their gods will certainly be a snare to you.”

The LORD gives Joshua three different requirements as it relates to his response to God’s Word.

Obey the Word

Joshua is cautioned to obey all of it. No deviation to the right or to the left would be acceptable. The human tendency is to follow God’s Word selectively—to remember and put into the practice what is convenient, but to forget and neglect the difficult parts. We tend to want to follow our own ideas and think that our way is better than God’s. We don’t like to be told what to do, not even by God. However, if we want true success in life, it only comes by doing things God’s way. If Joshua was to have success, if he was to be effective in his role as Israel’s leader in the Promised Land, he had to act strictly based on the Word of God. In order for Joshua to obey the Word in this way, to remember crucial tasks, to trust God for and take advantage of promised provisions, and to avoid the pitfalls God warned His people about, he needs to be intimately familiar with the Word. This familiarity would require Joshua to talk about and meditate on God’s Word all the time.

Talk about the Word

Joshua wasn't to allow the Word to depart from his mouth. He was to read it aloud. He was to have it on the tip of his tongue allowing it to shape his words. He was to talk about it constantly and not stop talking about it. The Israelite people who Joshua led were to hear regularly from his lips the Word of God spoken.

Meditate on the Word

Joshua was to meditate on the Word all the time—day and night—not just every once in a while. Skimming the Word, reading a verse or two here and there, hit and miss study wasn't acceptable. Joshua was to rehearse God's Word on a constant basis so as to allow it to be woven into the fabric of his life, directing all he said and did, shaping his conduct in every way.

If Joshua was to talk about the Word, meditate on the Word, and do what it says, God promised prosperity and success. This isn't a prosperity gospel—i.e. Do this and get rich. Success is the accomplishment of what God has for us to do. Prosperity is the blessing of God that results from our obedience to God.

Be strong and courageous reassured by God's presence

As Joshua reckoned it as true fact that God would be present with him wherever he went, he would be enabled to respond with strength and courage as opposed to being terrified and discouraged.

When fearful, intimidating circumstances threaten the faithful carrying out of our God given mission, we need to look to God as the source of the strength and courage we need. We need to march ahead as God's strong and brave servants, depending fully and desperately upon Him and remembering the promise of His abiding presence with us.

Joshua's preparation of the people (1:10-15)

Once Joshua received the LORD's instructions and marching orders, he doesn't give pause. He demonstrates his faith in God by immediately assuming command and preparing the people of Israel to enter Canaan. He passes on to the people the command he had received from the LORD.

Joshua directs the officers (10-11)

He orders the officers to organize the camp for departure. God's people are to get their supplies ready as in three days they will march across the Jordan into Canaan. In the midst of instructing the officers, Joshua reminds them of God's promise. The land they are about to enter and take possession of is the land God is giving them as their very own. Promise is about to become possession!

Joshua reminds the Transjordanites about their obligation (1:12-15)

Joshua demonstrates right away the careful attention to the Word of God the LORD instructed him to give. Per God's instruction, "You and all these people, get ready to cross the Jordan River" and per Moses instruction recorded in Numbers 32 and Deuteronomy 3:18-20, Joshua reminds the tribes planning to live in the land East of the Jordan that before they settle down, they must first keep their earlier promise and assist their brethren in possessing the land God is giving them. The women and children of these Transjordan tribes can stay behind, but the fighting men must cross the Jordan ahead of their brothers to fight for them until they possess the land and the LORD gives them rest. It is important that these tribes help fight to maintain the unity and morale of the people. If they refuse to fight, it would be sin as they promised they would and Moses commanded they do so, but it would also threaten to fragment and discourage the nation as a whole.

The response of these tribes demonstrates that they haven't forgotten their promise and responsibility. They are ready and willing to join their brethren in the fight and in fact are ready to go to the front of the battle.

The people promise obedience to Joshua's command (1:16-18)

The people of the Transjordan tribes express their support for Joshua's leadership. They communicate their commitment to do what Joshua commanded and to go where Joshua sent them. Certainly it was encouraging for Joshua to know the people were united in following him. I do wonder, however, how Joshua responded on the inside to their statement, "Just as we fully obeyed Moses, so we will obey you." I wonder if the irony of their statement ever dawned on them. Just the same, this is a new generation of Israel that is different from their rebellious parents and they are sincere in their intentions to commit to following Joshua.

The only condition the people put on Joshua is that the LORD be present with him as He was with Moses. They want Joshua to be the same kind of leader Moses was in that God's presence was evident. The people are so committed at this point to Joshua's leadership that they are willing to impose accountability and severe discipline on those who rebel- "Whoever rebels against your word and does not obey your words, whatever you may command them, will be put to death." The people close by echoing the same encouragement that the LORD did—"Be strong and courageous."

What are the implications of this passage for our lives today?

Let's not allow fear to keep us from accomplishing what God wants of us.

Let's face our daunting challenges and uncertain situations with courage and strength.

Courage and strength are ours when we remember God's promises, make His Word a priority, and are reassured by His presence.

Let's obey our manual for success, the Word of God, in order that we might enjoy the prosperity and success it brings.

Let's be careful to think of success and prosperity from God's point of view. As Kenneth Gangel writes, "Success and prosperity come when a person follows God's will, obeys God's Word, and achieves God's goal, not when the offering (and I would add income) is greater this year than last year at this time."

Let's keep our word and stick with our commitments—God holds us accountable to do what we said we would do.