

Be Strong and Courageous

JOSHUA 1:1-18; MATTHEW 28:20; REVELATION 21:1-4

Rev. Nollie Malabuyo • June 4, 2017 • Big Springs Community Church

Congregation of Christ: “The Old Testament gives us something very different than what we might call ‘history’ today. The Old Testament does not contain one systematic and consistent body of “truth” but various, and even conflicting, perspectives. The Old Testament “evolved” over time until it came to its final expression. The Old Testament, technically speaking, is a product of the Judahites in the centuries following their return from Babylonian captivity (539 BCE).”

This is a quote from Peter Enns, a fallen professor who was a professor for 14 years at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, one of the best Reformed seminaries in the world. He was terminated from the seminary because he was teaching against the inspiration and the inerrancy of the Bible. He insists that he is still a Christian, but his faith only consists of “trust” in Christ, but not “belief.” Today, he continues to poison young minds at Eastern University in Pennsylvania.

Today we begin our sermon series on the Book of Joshua, one of the books that Peter Enns doubts was inspired by the Holy Spirit. The story of the sun standing still in Joshua 10, for example, is one of the Old Testament stories that is not true history for him.

The Book of Joshua was written by an unknown author probably much later after the events in the book took place. One evidence is the repeated reference – 15 times – to something existing “*to this day*” (e.g., 4:9; 5:9; 6:25). The main theme of the book is God’s faithfulness to his people Israel in giving them all the Promised Land through conquest and settlement. God fulfilled all his covenant promises to Israel, even after they were unfaithful throughout their 40-year wilderness wanderings from Egypt to Canaan. Most Bible scholars place these events in the 15th century or 13th century B.C.

The book can be divided into four main parts, all related to the Promised Land: (1) crossing into the land (Chapters 1-5); (2) taking the land (Chapters 6-12); (3) dividing the land (Chapters 13-21); and (4) serving the Lord in the land (Chapters 22-24).¹ The book ends with Joshua encouraging the people to continue serving the Lord, and afterward, his death.

Another main theme of the book is his promise, “*I will be with you,*” which is the ground for his repeated exhortation, “*Be strong and courageous.*” These two themes are already found in our text this morning.

“Just as I Promised Moses”

Our text opens with a reference to “*Moses the servant of the Lord,*” who has died. Who would God appoint as the successor of the most revered of all prophets of Israel? He led the nation out of Egypt with great signs and wonders. He gave them the Law of God. He spoke “face to face” with the Lord. So before his death, we read these words, “*And there has not*

¹ ESV Study Bible.

arisen a prophet since in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face, none like him for all” (Deu 34:10-11).

How would God replace Israel’s greatest prophet? No, there was no dynasty. The two sons of Moses were not in play. It was *“Joshua the son of Nun, Moses’ assistant,”* the same Joshua, who, with Caleb, were the only two spies out of twelve who trusted God’s promise to give the mighty cities of the Promised Land to Israel. His name means “Yahweh saves,” which fits his God-appointed role. Right after the Red Sea crossing, Joshua led Israel’s victory over the Amalekites (Exo 17:8–13).

Near the time of his death, the Lord instructed Moses to commission Joshua before “all the congregation” (Num 27:18–19). Joshua was to be the one to lead Israel into the Promised Land (Deu 1:38; 3:28; 31:23). So in Deuteronomy 34:9, we read of the transfer of leadership before the death of Moses, *“And Joshua the son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom, for Moses had laid his hands on him.”* In our text today, God commissioned him, *“cross the Jordan River into the land I am about to give to them... you will lead these people to inherit the land I swore to their forefathers to give them”* (verses 1-6). There is no doubt that God chose Joshua to succeed Moses.

But God’s commission to Joshua is not one in which he says, “Okay, here’s your job responsibilities. Just do it.” No, Joshua was reassured by God, *“Every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon I have given to you, just as I promised to Moses. No one will be able to stand up against you all the days of your life”* (verses 3 and 5).

What was God’s promise to Moses? When the Israelites were still in the plains of Moab east of the River Jordan, God promised to Moses, *“Every place on which the sole of your foot treads shall be yours.”* (Deu 11:24). This is the same promise the Lord made to Joshua in verse 3. This promise implies that they were to go into the land that God had promised them. They can’t just stay outside the land, fearful of the fortified cities and their mighty armies, and wait for God to fight for them. Although God would lead them in their battles, they were to trust his promise and do what God has commanded them: “Trust me, and just do it!”

For us as well, in our spiritual battles, we are to trust God’s promises in his Word and obey his commandments. When we sin, we are to trust his promise of forgiveness when we repent. When we are in distress and suffering, he commands us to pray without ceasing, trusting that he will hear our prayers one way or another. When we know that the Holy Spirit has given us spiritual gifts, we are to use these gifts because God has promised that he will use our gifts to build up the church.

And what was promised to Moses? It was one of the promises that God gave to Abraham: a land for his people’s sojourning. At that time, the boundaries of the Promised Land were not yet specified, but God said, *“To your offspring I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates”* (Gen 15:18). When the Israelites finally arrived at the gates of Canaan, on the plains of Moab west of the Jordan River, God delineated the land’s boundaries from east to west and from north to south (Num 34).

Verse 4 of our text summarizes these boundaries, *"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."* This land, the land of the Hittites, included present-day Israel, Lebanon, and parts of Syria, Jordan and Egypt. The land that Israel eventually settled is somewhat different from the land that God promised back in Numbers 34. God's boundaries included Damascus north of Sidon, but Israel never settled there. Also, the original boundaries did not include land east of the River Jordan, but the tribes of Reuben, Gad and Manasseh settled it after they defeated the kings there.

The Lord was faithful to all his promises. At the end of the book, after Israel had conquered and settled what God had promised, we find this summary:

Thus the LORD gave to Israel all the land that he swore to give to their fathers. And they took possession of it, and they settled there. And the LORD gave them rest on every side just as he had sworn to their fathers. Not one of all their enemies had withstood them, for the LORD had given all their enemies into their hands. Not one word of all the good promises that the LORD had made to the house of Israel had failed; all came to pass.

Five to 600 years after God promised this land to Abraham and his children, he fulfilled it. His promises can never be thwarted by the failures of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and the rebellion and unfaithfulness of the twelve tribes in the wilderness. How great a God we have! Were there times in your life when there was no hope, but God rescued you? Recall those days, and your trust in God's promises will keep your faith strong in the face of difficulties.

This is what God promised Joshua and all the people.

"I Will Be With You"

God's promise to Joshua – and to Abraham and Moses before him – is in verse 5, *"As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you."*

These are the same words that God promised to Israel through Moses before they crossed the Jordan River, *"Be strong and courageous. Do not fear or be in dread of them, for it is the LORD your God who goes with you. He will not leave you or forsake you"* (Deu 31:6). About five centuries later, before he died, King David gave the same encouragement to his son Solomon, *"Be strong and courageous and do it. Do not be afraid and do not be dismayed, for the LORD God, even my God, is with you. He will not leave you or forsake you"* (1 Chr 28:20). He was encouraging him to finish the building of the temple.

God encouraged them to be strong and courageous to complete their appointed tasks. Moses' task was impossible: ask the most powerful man on earth to free Egypt's hundreds of thousands of slaves! What was the ransom or payment that Moses offered Pharaoh? Not a single ounce of gold. Pharaoh must have laughed rolling on the floor at his request. But God fulfilled what he promised to Moses and the people. All Israel escaped Egypt, taking with them some of Egypt's treasures.

Joshua's task was equally impossible: taking on powerful fortified cities with their mighty professionally-trained warriors with chariots. What did Israel have? A ragtag militia with not a single chariot. But one by one, God gave all the cities into the hand of Israel.

God's encouragement to be strong and courageous is grounded on a promise: *"I will be with you. I will not leave you or forsake you."* From the beginning, in the Garden of Eden, God dwelt with his people, Adam and Eve. They had perfect communion with God. But even after they disobeyed, God continued his presence with them. Enoch and Noah *"walked with God."* God led Abraham from his pagan roots to Canaan, and was with him till his death. After 400 years as slaves in Egypt, his descendants had forgotten God, but God still delivered them through Moses. He was with them when he dried up the Red Sea so they could cross on dry ground. After Moses built the tabernacle, God dwelt with the Israelites all 40 years in the tabernacle until they reached the Promised Land. In fact, the Hebrew word for tabernacle means "dwelling-place" or "tent where God dwelt, *"the house of the Lord your God"* (Exo 23:19).

King David's hope was that he will *"dwell in the house of the Lord forever"* (Psa 23:6). The one thing he asked of God, that he sought after, is to *"gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to inquire in his temple"* (Psa 27:4). His longing was of course granted after he died and gazed upon the beauty of the Lord in heaven. His son Solomon then finished the temple where God dwelt with his people for almost five centuries before it was destroyed by the Babylonians.

Afterward, for four more centuries, Israel longed for the Messiah to come. In the fullness of time, Immanuel – *"God with us"* – arrived as the baby Jesus in a manger, *"the Word became flesh [who] dwelt among us"* (John 1:14). He "tabernacles" among us all of our days and into eternity. This is what God has promised us in Revelation 21:3, when in the new heaven and new earth, *"the dwelling place [the tabernacle] of God is with man. He will dwell [tabernacle] with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God."*

"Meditate on the Law Day and Night"

But God's encouragement to be strong and courageous also has a condition in verses 7-8. Joshua and the people must *"do according to all the law that Moses my servant commanded you."* The Word of God must be at the center of their worship, doctrine and practice. They must be followed strictly, *"Do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left."* Again, this was the same exhortation God gave them in Deuteronomy 28:14 before they crossed the Jordan River. They will prosper in the land *"if you do not turn aside from any of the words that I command you today, to the right hand or to the left, to go after other gods to serve them."* The Lord reminded them back in Deuteronomy 12:32, *"Everything that I command you, you shall be careful to do. You shall not add to it or take from it."*

Notice that turning to the right or to the left away from the straight path of God's Word is nothing less than *"going after other gods."* This already happened to Israel right after they escaped from Egypt when they worshiped the golden calf at Mount Sinai. And this idolatry happened repeatedly after Joshua died, from the time of the judges, to the kings, and the prophets, throughout all of Israel's history, resulting in the Babylonian exile.

All of God's Word is authoritative and sufficient for all of life. Our culture today has veered off almost completely from God's Word. Just last Sunday, during the Northern Illinois Conference of the United Methodist Church, a transgender deacon was ordained. And 64 percent of all Americans now approve of same-sex marriage, reasoning that the Bible's condemnation of homosexuality as an abomination to God is past its time, because times have changed (Gallup Poll, May 15, 2017). Another 70 percent of Americans (Quinnipiac University poll, January 28, 2017) are also pro-abortion, justifying their stance because they have been wrongly convinced that an unborn baby is just a "fetus," not a human being. But when an unborn dog or cat is used for experimental purposes, a great howl of protest would follow.

This is the extent of our culture's wickedness because it has rejected God's Word. God repeats this solemn warning against twisting his Word in Revelation 22:18-19, *"if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city."*

The Lord gave Joshua and the people a formula for obedience: *"you shall meditate on [God's Law] day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it."* Constant reading, studying and meditating on God's Word will lead to obedience. Psalm 1:2-3 has this exhortation to us: the righteous person's *"delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night."* The result? *"In all that he does, he prospers,"* the same promise of success to Joshua and Israel. And Joshua had success in conquering and settling the Promised Land because, *"He left nothing undone of all that the LORD had commanded Moses"* (Jos 11:15).

Dear friends, your comfort from Joshua Chapter 1 is this: you will be strong and courageous when you trust God's promise that he will be with you through all your life's ups and downs. It might not seem to you that he is with you when you have afflictions and sufferings, but he is sovereign over all things in heaven and on earth. Only he can work all things out, and knows all things, for your good.

You can trust in his promises. His Word is full of God's mighty works for his people in the past, fulfilling his promises. From creation, he has promised that he will send a Savior to be with you. His name is *Jesus – Joshua* in Hebrew – which means "the Lord saves." He is also called Immanuel, "God with us." Believe and trust in his promise to save you from your sins and God's wrath. And after he has saved you, he will be with you to the end of the age. He will never forsake you because God forsook his only-begotten Son Jesus Christ on the cross for you.