

WHEREVER YOU GO: THE BOOK OF JOSHUA

Week One: Introduction

The book of Joshua recounts the history of an important era in the history of God's people, as they entered the Promised Land and by God's grace took possession of it. In some respects, it is an Old Testament counterpart to the book of Acts, which details the rapid spread of the gospel in the earliest decades of the church of Christ. While we should not press the analogy too closely, there are some useful parallels. As is so often the case with the books of the Old Testament, Joshua illustrates on a physical level some of the themes that Acts illustrates on a spiritual level, and thus Joshua can be instructive to believers of all eras.

Jesus promised his disciples that he would be with them wherever they went, and we see this promise fulfilled throughout Acts. In the same way, God repeatedly assures Joshua that he will be with his people wherever they go (for example, in Joshua 1:7, 1:9). This promise is then fulfilled throughout the book of Joshua, as God leads his people from one victory to another. Only when they disregarded their God and ignored his teachings did they suffer defeat. This lesson is also taught in Acts, although that book also cautions us that our victories in Jesus will not always be on a physical, earthly level for all to see. As Christians, some of our greatest victories are spiritual successes that cannot be described by numbers or other outward results.

Although we generally think of Joshua as a historical book, since it provides a purely factual narrative of events, the ancient Jews classified it as a prophetic book. They referred the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings as the 'Former Prophets'. (They used the term 'Latter Prophets' to refer to most of the books that we usually classify as prophetic, such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, and so forth.) They used this term because the history in Joshua and the other books of the 'Former Prophets' is interpretive history, with a deliberate emphasis on demonstrating how the people's relationship with God affected events and developments.

The book of Joshua begins at the moment when Moses has passed away, and God has called Joshua to guide the people into the Promised Land. The Exodus and the forty years of wandering in the desert are now over, and it is time for new challenges and new blessings. Joshua covers about 25 years of Israelite history, up to the time when the conquest and occupation of Canaan were largely completed. These events took place from roughly 1405-1380 BC. (If the Bible's historical chronology is correct, then the Exodus probably began about 1445 BC. Other commentators rely instead on inscriptions from the reign of Pharaoh Rameses II, and place the Exodus in 1250 BC, which would place the beginning of Joshua at about 1210 BC).

The book follows a straightforward outline. First there are the preparations for occupying the Promised Land (Joshua 1-5), and then the occupation and conquest of the land (Joshua 6-12). After God brings the people into the land, inheritances are assigned according to God's will (Joshua 13-21). The people then begin to live in the land, under the call to do so in faithfulness to God's covenant (Joshua 22-24). God's hand was at work in each of these stages, and even as he guided and led his people, God's plans transcended their own needs and their own lives.

- Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, 2006

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Week Two: Be Strong & Courageous (Joshua 1)

Joshua has just succeeded Moses as the leader of God's people. And he has done so at a crucial moment in their history, as they are about to be led into the long-awaited Promised Land of Canaan. God's message in this chapter is meant to reassure Joshua for the job ahead, and to help both him and the people to have the right perspective as God guides them through everything that lies ahead.

This is, of course, the second time that the people have reached this point, but on the first occasion they shrunk back, with spiritually disastrous consequences. This is a new generation, though, and most of them have waited for this moment all of their lives. Aside from Joshua himself and Caleb, only a few Israelites remember Egypt, and they lived there only as children. At the same time, the only leader they have ever known has now passed away, and God has chosen a new man to lead them.

God therefore issues a strong re-assurance that he will be with Joshua and the people in all that is ahead of them (1:1-9). He reiterates the promise that the land will be theirs, and he even confirms the boundaries that he has in mind. More than that, several times God emphasizes that he will be with them, "every place where you set your foot" (verse 3), and "wherever you go" (verse 7 and verse 9). He also promises never to leave or forsake Joshua (verse 5).

In return, God calls Joshua to be strong and courageous. This is so important that God says it no fewer than three times (verse 6, verse 7, and verse 9). For it is not Joshua's own innate strength or courage that will matter, but rather the strength and courage that God will enable him to have because Joshua trusts God and believes his promises. Neither Moses nor Joshua nor any other leader of Israel was chosen because of his own great strength and courage. Rather, they were chosen for their faithfulness to God. For God can always give true strength and courage to the faithful, but those who rely on their own fleshly strength and courage can never be as useful to him or as pleasing to him.

Joshua in turn calls the people to get ready (1:10-15). There were two different groups in the Israelite camp at this time, for some of the tribes had already requested to take as their inheritance the land on the eastern side of the Jordan. These lands had already been taken by the Israelites, and thus these tribes had to promise to send their fighting men across the Jordan with the other tribes, even though they already had their inheritance. These tribes, then, are reminded to fight to fulfill their promise, and to show their appreciation for what they have already been given. The rest of the tribes are about to gain their inheritance, and they must fight in order to receive it. It is significant that both groups have the same responsibility in the coming battles.

The people then respond to Joshua, re-affirming their intention to be faithful (1:16-18). As they do so, they also exhort Joshua to be strong and courageous (verse 18). They know that it is not Joshua's own abilities that they need, but instead the help and guidance that God himself will give them through Joshua.

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Week Three: Rahab & the Scarlet Cord (Joshua 2)

In preparation for the entry into Canaan, Joshua sends out two spies to study Jericho, a heavily defended town that was just across the Jordan River from the Israelites' encampment. God leads the spies to Rahab, who keeps them at her house and hides them from danger. Rahab is one of the Old Testament's most encouraging examples of how God extends his grace to anyone, regardless of nationality, background, or status, who chooses to be faithful to him. God's grace is just as evident in the Old Testament as it is in the New.

First we learn what Rahab does for the two spies (2:1-7). As they are staying at her house, the authorities find out about them. The king of Jericho, alarmed, thus demands that Rahab hand the spies over to him. But instead of turning them over to imprisonment and probable death, Rahab hides and protects them, and then sends the king's henchmen off on a 'snipe hunt'. God in his grace thus led his servants to the one place in Jericho where they would be safe.

Rahab then reveals the reasons why she has gone to such trouble and has taken such risks (2:8-13). She and all the residents of Jericho know all about the Israelites and what God has done for them and through them. They are all afraid of what will happen to them, because news has reached them of the victories that God gave them under Moses. Yet while the king and most of the rest of Jericho are engaged in a desperate attempt to capture the spies and somehow to stop the Israelites, Rahab alone grasps the true significance of events.

This humble woman alone realizes that the things that have happened are an indication of God's hand at work, and she wants to know and to worship the true, living God. She is not turning against her city or her people, but rather is turning to God for life and salvation. She is willing to risk everything she has in order to join a foreign people, not because she was so impressed with them in themselves, but because she believed in the living God whom they served. In compassion, she also begs the spies to allow her family to be saved.

Rahab and the two spies thus come to an agreement (2:14-24), after which the spies bring their positive report back to Joshua. They agree to save Rahab's family, on the condition that she tie a scarlet cord in her window for recognition. This small symbol is a reminder to us of God's grace, which is always ready to be poured out on those who know that they need it. Just as God showed his grace to the spies by leading them to Rahab, so also he showed his grace to her, knowing that she believed in him and wanted to seek him.

Just as God provided Rahab an opportunity to escape the destruction that would befall the sinful city she lived in, so also when God sees anyone who wants to escape this world of sin and death, he gives them a chance to do so. We should never doubt God's ability to save, in any place, at any time, and in any situation. God always knows the hearts that seek the truth, and he always stands ready to give them the opportunity that they need.

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Week Four: Crossing the Jordan (Joshua 3)

It is almost time for the Israelites to take possession of the land that has long been promised to them as their inheritance. But between them and the Promised Land is a considerable obstacle, the Jordan River. It might have been possible for a small group of men to build a craft to carry them across, but the river was much too wide and too deep for such an enormous group of human beings, with all their possessions, to cross without considerable preparation, delay, and risk. God thus performs the first of his great miracles for a new generation of his people.

The crossing of the Jordan parallels the crossing of the Red Sea by the previous generation. In both cases, the people had to cross entirely by faith, believing that God could do an amazing miracle that allowed them to do something that was otherwise impossible. In both cases, God's miracle was the start of a new era - in the first case, their final freedom from Egypt, and in the second case, their occupation of the Promised Land.

But there is also a crucial difference. As the previous generation approached the Red Sea and saw Pharaoh's army pursuing them, they doubted, and they complained against Moses until God's hand worked the miracle. Even then, of course, their faith was short-lived, for they soon fell again and again into the same kind of complaining and doubting. But this new generation has a stronger faith in God. They know the battles and the obstacles that they will face in the days ahead. But they also know that it is God's power, not their own, that will sustain them.

Joshua's instructions to the people emphasize the role of the ark of the covenant, which serves as a visible symbol of God's presence (3:1-6). The priests are to carry the ark ahead of everyone else, and the others are to follow at a distance of two thousand cubits, or well over half of a mile. This procedure stresses the importance of God's presence in what they are about to do, while at the same time cautioning them to maintain a respectful distance from God's presence. In fact, a great many Old Testament regulations are based on these principles. Even as Christians, we would do well to remind ourselves of the power and also of the holiness that comes with God's presence being a reality in our lives and ministries.

Through Joshua, God told the Israelites what he was about to do, and called them to remember it also as a sign of future victories (3:7-13). Note too that the idea of crossing the Jordan in this way came from God, not from their own initiative. This time, though, there is no grumbling, no desire to return to the past, and no doubting. The people are ready to go where God - as represented tangibly here by the ark - leads them, and they indeed cross the riverbed safely while God holds back the waters (3:14-17). Such are the blessings and victories that God is able to give us when we trust in his power, and allow him to lead us, rather than relying on our own abilities and ideas, and following human agendas.

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Week Five: Twelve Stones (Joshua 4)

God has led his people across the Jordan, by holding back the waters for them just as he had held back the waters of the Red Sea for the previous generation. Now they are in the Promised Land of Canaan, and soon will begin the lengthy task of driving out the idolatrous nations that currently occupy it. But before going any further, before fighting any battles, and even before God restores the Jordan to its natural condition, there is something important to be done.

As the people finish crossing the river, with the waters still held back by God's hand, God directs Joshua to establish a memorial of what has just happened (4:1-7). The arrangements are interesting: Joshua is to choose one man from each of the twelve tribes (a familiar procedure among the Israelites), and have each of these men pick up a stone from the middle of the river, as a visible reminder of having passed through it. These stones will then be arranged into a memorial that will commemorate the crossing of the Jordan, for the people present and also for future generations.

As the priests who were entrusted with the ark continue to stand with it in the middle of the riverbed, God's instructions for the memorial are carried out (4:8-24). The stones are collected, and when all the people, including the priests, had safely reached the other side of the river, God restores the Jordan to its normal place and flow. The memorial is set up at Gilgal, and Joshua again exhorts the people to make use of it in reminding themselves and their descendants of God's power.

Such memorials are a common practice in many areas of life. Even in Christianity, we need frequently to be reminded of the basis of our faith and of all that God has done for us through Jesus. In the New Covenant, our memorials are less physical and tangible, but they are still there. The Lord's Supper, in fact, is one of the more visible forms of memorial, and it is no accident that, for example, Paul told the Corinthians that many of their difficulties came from misusing the Lord's Supper, by turning it into a worldly occasion to indulge their flesh.

We also may have many other memorials, of a less physical nature, that we can and ought to use to remind us of all that God has done, and of all the ways that he has displayed his power. When God brings us blessings and victories, we ought to have the patience to dwell for a time on what he has done, rather than impatiently racing ahead to the next thing that we want from him. It is worth the time to consider how we can remember the ways that God has showed us his love and his power, and if we do this, it will also build our faith for the future.

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Week Six: Preparing For Jericho (Joshua 5)

Behind the people now lies the Jordan River, which they have just crossed. Ahead of them lies the town of Jericho, ready for the taking. But there are some final preparations that are necessary before they can take direct action. These preparations are not military, financial, or strategic, but rather spiritual. Indeed, we see this throughout the Scriptures. Preparing spiritually, by focusing ourselves on God, by cleansing ourselves of uncleanness, and by reminding ourselves of God's power and wisdom, is much more important than having our own clever plans and ideas.

Already the news of the miraculous crossing of the Jordan had spread throughout Canaan (5:1), so that the Canaanites and Amorites were terrified of the Israelites, and were ready to flee from them rather than fight them. And yet God does not send his people against them just now, for he does not want them winning victories without seeing and acknowledging his own hand at work.

Before going any further into the Promised Land, Joshua and the people must correct a crucial omission, by circumcising the new generation of men who had grown up during the years in the desert (5:2-9). As the passage explains, no circumcisions had been performed during all those years. Joshua and the others born in Egypt had been circumcised long ago while still in Egypt, but every male under forty years of age still needed to be circumcised.

The mass circumcision that follows gave Gilgal its name because, by performing the circumcisions, Joshua and the others allowed God to 'roll away' the reproach from Israel. Notice that God waited until the Jordan had been crossed before insisting that the long-delayed rites finally be performed. Circumcision formally identified a person as belonging to God, and as being included in his covenant. It is now time for a fresh start, after the previous generation had turned away from the covenant and rejected God's purpose for them. By delaying the new generation's circumcision, God thus made an emphatic statement that this is a new beginning.

Another change followed, as the manna that had long fed God's people now ceased, and they began to eat of the produce of Canaan itself (5:10-12). God's gift of the Promised Land inherently entailed the responsibility of the people to work the land, rather than continuing to receive the manna from heaven. Like a number of other things, the manna was to be left behind in the desert. Indeed, whenever we are on the verge of a new beginning, or of a new responsibility, God often accompanies the new opportunity or blessing with the expectation that we can devote ourselves more fully to him, and can accept new challenges.

Joshua himself also experiences an important moment (5:13-15). Joshua encounters a heavenly being - whom he does not recognize as such at first - and he is reminded of the holiness of God's plans. Just as Moses before him was once called to do, many years before, Joshua is told to remove his sandals in recognition that he is standing on holy ground. Though this is a simple point, God found it worth re-emphasizing. As God used Joshua to lead and guide the people, it was especially important for Joshua to remember God and to know that God's hand was at work.

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Week Seven: God's Plans For Taking Jericho (Joshua 6:1-14)

The account of the fall of Jericho is one of the Old Testament's best-known stories. All the same, it is well worth the time it takes to read through the account once more, and to notice the principles that God illustrates as he leads his people to this famous victory. God himself, of course, was both the author of the victory and the source of the power that overthrew the city. But he chose to do this through the medium of his people, and in the course of so doing, he taught them some lessons, and he also illustrated some significant principles for us to consider.

God begins by reassuring Joshua and the people that Jericho will be theirs, and he then gives some specific instructions (6:1-5). They are to follow a rather elaborate procedure, marching around the city wall once each day for six days, and then seven times on the seventh day. After this, the people are to shout in unison upon receiving the signal from the priests, and then the city walls will collapse. Now God had already done miracles far more amazing than knocking down a wall, and had done so without any human activity involved. So, in giving such detailed directions, he does not need their assistance, but rather he is trying to teach them something.

Joshua puts these instructions into practice precisely as God had told him to (6:6-14). For six days, a carefully ordered procession walked around the city's outer wall, sounding trumpets but never shouting. As a result of these apparently tedious exercises, they learned at least two important things. They saw for themselves, first-hand and at close range, how formidable the city's defenses were. They became thoroughly familiar with the obstacles that they faced, and thus gradually realized that on their own the conquest of Jericho would be a formidable and time-consuming task, if indeed it would be possible at all.

Then too, the people learned obedience to God's plans. Not only did Joshua impress upon them the importance of following God's instructions precisely, but they also came to realize, day by day, that they could indeed put this into practice. One of the failings of the previous generation was that they simply did not have the necessary faith and patience to do things the way that God had told them to. From the day they left Egypt, they were never able to be faithful in persevering through difficulties, or to be patient in following the path that God had laid out for them. Instead, they always wanted immediate results. All this was sadly ironic in view of the many years of bondage that they had endured before God delivered them.

But this new generation was able gradually to realize that they could, in faith, learn to walk as God had called them to, and that they could obey him even when the reasons for his commands were unclear. Through six days of tedious marching and trumpeting, with no outward results to show for it, they could see that following God's commands does not have to be difficult. Even when they could see no immediate results, they could learn the value of trusting and obeying God for its own sake.

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Week Eight: Jericho Is Taken (Joshua 6:15-27)

God had a plan to deliver the strongly fortified city of Jericho into his people's hands, and to do it by his own power. He gave his people elaborate instructions, telling them to form a carefully arranged procession and to march around the city wall each day for six days. Thus they clearly understood the obstacles that stood before them, and they learned to live in faith and obedience to God. Now the time has come for them to experience victory in taking Jericho.

Joshua gives them some final instructions on the day of Jericho's fall (6:15-19). After reminding them of the plan for taking the city, he details what they are to do afterward. He emphasizes (in verse 17, verse 18, and also in verse 21) that the city and its contents are to be 'devoted to the Lord'. This phrase refers to things given irrevocably to God, no longer to be used by any human being, and never to be returned to common use. Articles of silver, gold, bronze, and iron were to be put into the treasury for God's use, and everything else was to be destroyed - the people were to keep nothing for themselves.

The Israelites followed the plan God had given them, and the city walls collapsed just as God had promised (6:20-21). In following God's command, the Israelites put to death the people of Jericho, leaving no survivors except Rahab and her family (see below). Such complete annihilation followed many Israelite victories, and it has often troubled readers of the Bible over the years. It did clearly come at God's command, though, and it was his will for this to happen.

At least one of the reasons for this was the extreme and deep-rooted sinfulness and idolatry among the peoples of Canaan. Practices such as human sacrifice, ritualized killing of children, mass sexual immorality, bodily mutilations, and the like, were considered to be 'religious' activities that honored their 'gods'. Not only did God desire to punish these people for their sins, but he also wanted to do everything possible to prevent his people from coming into contact with so much evil on such a widespread scale. Ancient Jericho, in particular, was such a wicked place that Joshua pronounced a curse (6:26-27) on anyone who rebuilt it.

In the New Covenant of grace, God does not bring immediate punishment upon evildoers, and he also asks his people to live among them for a time. But the Day will come when there will be no more chances to repent. The fleshly mindset considers death to be the worst possible punishment, but eternal punishment is far more terrifying. Although humanity persistently tries to deny this side of God, this is not something that we are entitled to decide for ourselves. The Scriptures make clear to us that unforgiven sin has dire consequences, and we do not do anyone any favors if we try to deny this.

And even here, we see that God has always been a God of grace, for he tells his people to make certain that Rahab and her family are saved, in return for the faith that she had shown in helping his people (6:22-25). Rahab's own past sins did not prevent her from being saved, because her present faith in God was much more important. She is one of many examples that teach us what God looks for in those who turn to him.

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Week Nine: Defeat & Discipline (Joshua 7)

Until now, things have gone almost perfectly for the Israelites as they begin to take possession of the Promised Land. Every plan has succeeded, and every battle has been a victory. But now they go through a time of defeat and discipline. Proceeding from Jericho to the town of Ai, they sense an easy victory, but they instead experience a humiliating and painful defeat. In the aftermath of this loss, God reveals that one Israelite family had deliberately disobeyed him, and had to be disciplined.

At the victory over Jericho, a man named Achan took for himself some of the items that were designated as being devoted to God alone (7:1; the specific items are listed in 7:21). As a result, God did not grant them victory when they fought against Ai, and they instead suffered a shocking defeat (7:2-5). This unpleasant surprise was bad enough in itself, but even worse in that it caused the Israelites to give in to doubt and fear. Indeed, it is a common tendency of human nature to allow one defeat or struggle to erase the memory of many positive things.

Even Joshua became discouraged (7:6-9). Despite his great faith, he suddenly wishes that they had all stayed on the other side of the Jordan, since he now envisions the numerous Canaanite tribes ganging together to wipe out the Israelites. In response, God briefly reproves Joshua for suddenly becoming so gloomy, and then explains why he has allowed them to be defeated (7:10-12). The unauthorized taking of the devoted things will prevent God from being with them, until and unless it is dealt with decisively. The defeat, then, was not a sign that they had lost God's favor, but merely a necessary lesson.

God indicates that the offenders must be found and punished drastically (7:13-15), and the Israelites identify the family of Achan as the ones responsible, using the drawing of lots (7:16-18). The drawing of lots may seem random to us, but it is used a number of times in the Scriptures. In itself, this is not meant as an example for us to follow literally. Here and in other cases, the drawing of lots was part of God's plan, not an innovation of humans. Instead, the lesson this holds for us is to accept God's choices humbly, regardless of the means by which he chooses to reveal them to us.

Under questioning, Achan confesses his sin (7:19-23). When he saw the riches of Jericho that had been devoted to God, he could not resist taking some for himself. Achan is merely one of many sad examples of how quickly our fleshly desires can ruin us. Indeed, Achan and his family (who had apparently shared in the things he had taken) are pitilessly destroyed (7:24-26). This too is not an example to be followed literal, but it is a sobering reminder of the destructive power of our fleshly desires. God understands how easily we are tempted, but he never considers temptation or desire to be an acceptable reason for disobeying him or for harming one another. The way that he dealt with Achan is a dramatic expression of his feelings in this regard.

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Week Ten: Recovery & Renewal (Joshua 8)

The initial defeat at Ai, and the drastic punishment of Achan, who caused it, would certainly have been traumatic and difficult for the Israelite community, especially coming immediately after such encouraging victories. But God, in his grace, now grants them recovery and renewal. He sends them to attack Ai once again, but this time with his presence going with them and his wisdom guiding them. After a victory that eased the bitter memory of their discouraging defeat, the Israelites formally renew their covenant with God.

It is noteworthy that, after the cleansing discipline measured out to Achan and his family, God sent the Israelites right back to the scene of their recent defeat (8:1-2). He does not merely want to give them a victory, but to give them a fresh start. God knows that our past defeats or discouragements are often our biggest future obstacles. So he wants the people to see that neither Ai nor any other enemy can overcome them when they remain close to him. He simply reminds them that this time they are not to take for themselves anything that is devoted to him.

The people also learn from their previous defeat, and they form a plan that will even turn it into a tactical advantage (8:3-8). This is an important aspect of Christian growth. It can be painful and humiliating to review our defeats and mistakes, but this is one of the most important ways in which we learn. In this case, Joshua plans to turn the tables on an enemy that now has reason to show little respect for the Israelites. His plan cleverly makes use of this by using a fake retreat that will lure the warriors of Ai into a trap. Note how different this is from their first attack on Ai, when they thought they could take the city with little planning or effort.

This plan is carried out carefully by the Israelites (8:9-17), and it indeed works just as Joshua had envisioned. God gives the city into their hands (8:18), and the victory is a total one (8:19-29). This time, though, the people follow up on their success exactly as God had commanded them to do, by destroying everything except for the specific things that God had told them they could keep. They do not spare any necessary effort, nor do they allow their desires to lead them astray this time. Their example is a good one to follow, if we want God's hand to guide us to victory in our own lives and ministries.

Following the victory over Ai, the people renew their covenant with God (8:30-35). There are several significant aspects of this ceremony. Joshua begins by carefully building an altar in accordance with God's commands (compare 8:31 with Exodus 20:25). Sincere worship of God always involves a submission to his prescribed ways of doing things. Then they offer numerous sacrifices to God, as a reminder that everything they have comes from him. And Joshua copies out on stones the teachings of the Law of Moses, which he then reads in its entirety to the people. Respect for God's word is yet another indispensable component of genuine worship.

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Week Eleven: Israel & Gibeon (Joshua 9:1-10:15)

The victories over Jericho and Ai, with a period of defeat and discipline in between them, are followed by a much different sequence of events involving Israel and the people of Gibeon. The Gibeonites, like the rest of the Canaanite peoples, knew that the Israelites would soon come their way, and they feared them. But unlike the other Canaanites, the Gibeonites neither put up a futile defense nor trembled in paralyzed fear. They came up with an unusual plan, the consequences of which give us an interesting look at their relations with God's people.

While the other Canaanite tribes were frantically trying to make an armed stand against the Israelites, as a hopeless challenge against the power of the living God (9:1-2), the Gibeonites tried a much craftier approach (9:3-13). They prepare a delegation to go to Joshua in the Israelite camp and ask for peace, and they carefully arrange for these emissaries to look as if they had traveled a great distance, though in reality Gibeon was very close by.

Although the Gibeonites deliberately set out to deceive Joshua and the Israelites, their approach is a very interesting parallel to the ways that unbelievers often make their first steps towards God. The Gibeonites see their need on one level only, in that they are afraid of being killed. They do not really desire yet to know God for his own sake. But because they do understand and acknowledge God's power, at least insofar as they are able to, they come up with a plan that actually works in saving their lives.

Their plan succeeds in landing a peace treaty (9:14-15), in part because none of the Israelites thinks to ask for God's guidance. They simply accept the Gibeonite messengers based on their appearance - which, as is so very often the case, is deceptive. When the Israelites learn soon afterward that the Gibeonites are actually living very close to them, they have little choice but to honor the treaty they had made (9:16-27). It actually works out to mutual advantage, since the Gibeonites agree to serve a useful purpose by cutting wood and carrying water for the Israelite community, in return for a guarantee of safety unique among the peoples of Canaan.

When a group of Amorite tribes gang up on the Gibeonites and attack them, Joshua even comes to their rescue (10:1-15). With God's support and guidance, including a miraculous delay of the sunset (10:12-14), the Israelites save Gibeon from its enemies.

This sequence of events can give us some useful parallels for our own relations with those who are not believers in the gospel. We should honor our agreements with them and promises to them just as we would with believers, and we should realize that, at least in this world, we can interact with them to mutual advantage in ways that are acceptable to God. Only when it comes to our spiritual standing should we remember that they are different - not that they are inferior, but that they lack the power of God in their lives, and that they need our help.

- Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, 2006

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WHEREVER YOU GO: THE BOOK OF JOSHUA

Week Twelve: Canaan Is Given To Israel (Joshua 10:16-12:24)

After the Israelites had defeated the Amorite coalition that had threatened Gibeon, they immediately followed up on their victory by sweeping through the southern regions of Canaan. They then turned to the north, and experienced a string of unbroken victories there also. Once they had learned to follow God, to trust him, and to obey him, there was nothing that could stop them from gaining the blessings that God had promised to them.

Immediately after rescuing the Gibeonites from the Amorite forces, Joshua pursued the five Amorite kings who had led the attack, captured their cities, and executed the kings themselves (10:16-28). Once again he practices the complete annihilation that God had decreed for the idolatrous Amorites. After this victory, the Israelites had almost cut the land of Canaan in two, by conquering a strip of territory extending from the Jordan River almost to the territory of the Philistines, who lived along the seacoast.

Joshua's plans then follow a clear-cut strategy. God first gave them the land in the southern half of Canaan (10:29-42). The Israelites attacked and conquered the towns of Libnah, Lachish, and Eglon, which were near the edge of Philistine territory, in the southwest of Canaan. Then they turned to the southeast and took Hebron and Debir, and followed that with a sweep through the Negev, leaving only small pockets of Canaanite resistance in the whole southern half of Canaan.

The Israelites returned to their camp at Gilgal after this successful campaign (11:43), and prepared to turn north. But the tribes of northern Canaan, led by the king of Hazor (a city north of the Sea of Kinnereth, the ancient name for the Sea of Galilee), led a coalition that took the initiative and attacked Joshua first. God gave them all into Joshua's hands (11:1-9), and the loss of their armies made the conquest of the north much easier. Starting with Hazor itself, Joshua and the Israelites soon conquered most of northern Canaan, again leaving only small outposts of Canaanite survivors (11:10-23).

The book of Joshua then provides a detailed list of all of the kings and peoples in Canaan whom the Israelites had conquered (12:1-24). Although the list makes for dry reading and difficult pronunciation, it is significant as one of the Bible's records showing that the events it describes are actual history, recorded by witnesses, of what God did in fulfilling his promises to his people. This detailed listing of defeated kings also reminds us that God alone is the real King, while the various humans who claim such titles have little real power.

This account of the conquest of Canaan illustrates many important spiritual principles. As Christians, we are not involved in armed conflict with the enemies of God. But we shall often be a part of spiritual struggles with implications that go beyond this present world. We too should learn to develop the faith, perseverance, and trusting obedience that enabled the Israelites to receive victories and blessings from God. We all want God to bless us, but to this we must add our willingness to walk in his ways, and to receive his blessings on the terms that he himself sets.

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WHEREVER YOU GO: THE BOOK OF JOSHUA

Week Thirteen: Finished Work & Unfinished Work (Joshua 13:1-14:5)

The Israelites have now eliminated every major source of opposition within Canaan, but they have by no means finished the job. As Joshua himself comes near to the end of his time as Israel's leader, God calls him to take stock of what has been done, and of what remains undone. While perhaps less exciting than experiencing victories from God's hand, this process of honest evaluation is sometimes important in our lives and ministries. It helps us to see both what God has done for us and given us, and also what lies ahead.

God himself points out that there is land left to be conquered, and he details exactly what remains (13:1-7). Although the main part of Canaan was theirs, the Israelites had allowed some smaller areas to go unconquered, and they also had not yet come close to extending their borders to the full area that God had planned to give them. It is particularly interesting that God mentions in detail the land of the Philistines, along the seacoast to the west of Israel, along with other large sections of land to the north and south that, in fact, the Israelites never took.

As we know from the rest of the Old Testament, ancient Israel made only relatively small territorial gains for the rest of their history. By allowing the Philistines and other idolatrous nations to have a strong presence within their own intended borders, they created many spiritual difficulties for later generations. By stopping when they were satisfied, rather than when God was satisfied, they laid the foundation for the problems that would eventually destroy the nation many years later.

But for the present, much had been accomplished, and indeed it was time for the tribes to divide up the land that they had already taken. (God implies in 13:1 that they should do this during Joshua's lifetime.) The process begins with the land east of the Jordan, which they had taken on their way to the Promised Land itself, and which had already been claimed by two tribes and half of a third (13:8-32). The details of the division had already been worked out under Moses, and it remained only to finalize the arrangements.

The tribe of Levi, uniquely, received no land (13:33), because of its special inheritance as those entrusted with the sacred things of God and with other important spiritual responsibilities. The remaining nine and one-half tribes (Joseph's two sons were each regarded as a separate tribe for inheritance purposes, keeping the number of shares at twelve even without Levi) were now to divide up the land on the west of the Jordan, which they had recently taken (14:1-5).

So too, in our own lives and ministries there are times when we must work hard despite receiving no immediate rewards, there are times when it is good to stop and enjoy the blessings that God has given us, and there are times when we need to take a careful look at the next ministry to which God has called us. It is not always easy to know when to make these transitions, and even then we may not really want to move on to a new stage. But a healthy relationship with God will include the willingness to work, to rest, or to take stock, however he directs us.

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WHEREVER YOU GO: THE BOOK OF JOSHUA

Week Fourteen: Caleb's Inheritance (Joshua 14:6-15)

Though most of the territory in the Promised Land was allotted by tribe, there was one special case. In these verses, we see the individual inheritance given to the faithful Caleb, who along with Joshua himself was the last link to the generation that had come out of Egypt in the Exodus. Like Joshua, Caleb had been faithful even when the rest of Israel was not. And like Joshua, he had to endure forty years of wandering in the desert because of the unbelief and disobedience of others. But now he receives at last the long-awaited reward for his efforts.

Caleb first reminds Joshua of the time when the two of them, along with Moses and Aaron, were ready to enter the Promised Land, but were opposed by the rest of the Israelites (14:6-9). Caleb's faith was significant at the time because he was part of a very small remnant that God used to build and guide the new generation. As a result, Moses gave Caleb a promise from God that his family would receive their own inheritance from the land that Caleb had personally explored that day (see Deuteronomy 1:34-36). Caleb knows that now at last the promise will be fulfilled.

Although Caleb is now much older, he has lost little of his energy, and none of his faith (14:10-12). His lifelong faith is an encouraging example, and one for us to follow. It is relatively easy to become excited about God and his promises for a short time, but as Jesus himself warned in the parable of the sower, troubles and worries will soon come and will test how faithful we really are. Caleb's life is a reminder that it is possible to keep our faith over the years, through whatever life brings us. Caleb and Joshua could easily have become resentful or frustrated over the fact that they spent forty years of their lives in the wilderness, all because of others' refusal to obey God. But instead they kept their faith to the end.

God's promises are always fulfilled, even if it takes a while for them to come to pass, and so Caleb now receives Hebron as a special inheritance for him and his family (14:13-15). His wholehearted faith is rewarded at last. So too God will always bless and reward those who keep their faith strong in spite of disappointments and discouragements. But, like Caleb, we must often wait much longer than we expected. This does not mean that God has ceased to love us, and it may not even mean that we ourselves have done anything wrong.

When God fulfills his promises to us quickly, we should praise him and give thanks for his gracious gifts. When we must instead wait for the things that God has promised, we should still praise him, and should still thank him for his promises, even when they have not yet been fulfilled. A promise is always as worthwhile as the one who made it, and God's promises are always true.

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WHEREVER YOU GO: THE BOOK OF JOSHUA

Week Fifteen: Allotting the Land (Joshua 15-19)

Although some significant work remains to be done, the major part of the conquest of Canaan has been completed. As a result, it is now time for individual allotments of land to be made to each of the tribes of Israel. The Scriptures record, in great detail, the boundaries and conditions of each tribe's inheritance, and at first glance it may appear as if this section has little to teach us. But like everything in the Bible, it would not be there if it did not hold some lessons for us.

The first tribe to be given the details of its inheritance was Judah (15:1-63). Although most of the place names in this chapter mean little to us, the complete description is included in God's Word to remind us first of all that these narratives describe real events that happened to real persons. Joshua and the others who lived at the time recorded God's instructions exactly, to show later generations that God had determined these arrangements, and to remind both them and us that God is true to his promises. This division of territory confirmed once for all that God had finally given them the Promised Land as their inheritance.

These descriptions also contain some details that have a greater significance of their own. The account of Judah's inheritance includes a reminder about Caleb's special portion of his tribe's legacy (verses 13-19), and it also reveals that the city of Jerusalem, though given to Judah, remained in the hands of the pagan Jebusites until a much later generation (verse 63).

The allotments for the two tribes descended from Joseph's sons are then given, first Ephraim (16:1-10) and then Manasseh (17:1-11). Here too we see the fulfillment of another old promise, as the five daughters of Zelophehad receive the inheritance promised to them by Moses (17:3-6; see also Numbers 27:1-11 and 36:1-12). And we see again that within the territory of each of these tribes there were portions that they did not or could not take from the Canaanites (16:10, 17:12-13).

In fact, so much of the territory of these two tribes remained occupied by Canaanites that they asked for a larger allotment, only to have Joshua tell them that the solution was to finish the job and take the land themselves (17:14-18). It is human nature - theirs and our own - to want things to come the easy way. But here, as will also happen many times in our own lives, God had already told them how the promises would come to pass, and they needed to do things his way.

After additional preparations (18:1-10), the rest of the land is divided between the other seven tribes (18:11-48). Two tribes, along with half of Manasseh, had of course already been given their inheritance on the east side of the Jordan, so those tribes do not receive additional land now. Finally, Joshua himself receives a personal allotment of land (19:49-51), and with this the process is completed. The many promises concerning the Promised Land had been fulfilled, through the faith of the Israelites and the mighty hand of God. It all came to pass just as he had promised, with fairness to each tribe, to each family, and to each individual. Someday we ourselves will share in the fulfillment of the even greater eternal Promised Land. When that happens, we shall again see God's truthfulness, love, faithfulness, and fairness proved true.

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WHEREVER YOU GO: THE BOOK OF JOSHUA

Week Sixteen: Special Cities & Towns (Joshua 20-21)

The entire territory of the Promised Land has now been divided up among the tribes by lot, as detailed in chapters 14 through 19. But within the territory of most of the tribes, certain cities and towns are also set apart for special purposes, as God now directs Joshua. In fact, there are two special purposes, quite different from each other, which God had in mind for these special settlements. Although the specific arrangements are no longer practiced, the principles behind them are still important.

God first told the people to designate several cities - some on each side of the Jordan - as cities of refuge (chapter 20). Anyone who had unintentionally caused someone else to die, whether out of negligence or through an accident, could use any one of these cities as a place of refuge, where it would be unlawful for the family or friends of the victim to enact revenge. This form of limited sanctuary would last until a trial, if necessary, could be arranged, or until the death of the high priest (which in ancient Israel was usually an occasion for a general amnesty).

This interesting provision is one of many examples that illustrate how different God's laws are from the laws of humans. This provision acknowledges that accidental tragedies will happen, and it acknowledges that in some such situations it would not be surprising if those close to the victim would seek private revenge. The cities of refuge provide a measure of protection and justice to both parties, and they deal with a difficult type of situation without resorting to force, prisons, or the other unimaginative and sometimes barbarous means that human authorities generally use to deal with such problems.

In a different and more widespread arrangement, towns were established within each tribe's territory for the use of the Levites (chapter 21). Since the tribe of Levi had no territory of its own, due its special responsibilities and identity, this provision provided for their needs while distributing them amongst each tribe, so that no area would be without priests or those qualified for other ministry activities. The arrangements are made with considerable detail, taking into account each tribe and further dividing the Levites according to which of Levi's three sons they had descended from.

In its own era, this procedure established a lasting way of providing for many of the nation's most basic spiritual needs. Even more significant for us are the principles behind it. Since the priests and Levites had no land of their own, they were always conscious of their need to depend on God to provide for them. This God did by asking everyone else to sacrifice in various ways to give the Levites the things they needed. In return, the Levites were called to devote their lives to the community's spiritual needs. In Christ, we are all priests under a new kind of covenant, and we thus inherit, in a spiritual sense, the role of the ancient tribe of Levi. These principles thus apply to us on a spiritual level.

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WHEREVER YOU GO: THE BOOK OF JOSHUA

Week Seventeen: A Nearly Tragic Misunderstanding (Joshua 22)

After all of the land was divided among the tribes, and the cities of refuge and the towns for the Levites had been designated, those tribes whose land was east of the Jordan were allowed to return to their own inheritance. The tribe of Reuben, the tribe of Gad, and half of the tribe of Manasseh had chosen to take their land east of the Jordan, in territory that the Israelites had conquered before entering Canaan itself, to the west of the Jordan. They were allowed to do so on the condition that their fighting men continue with the other tribes until the job of occupying Canaan had been completed (for details of this, see Numbers 32).

Since these two and one-half tribes have fulfilled their responsibilities to the rest of the Israelites, they are sent home with Joshua's blessing (22:1-9). But they decide to build a large altar near to their new homeland (22:10), and when the other tribes hear of this, they actually prepare to go to war against their brothers (22:1-12), assuming that the altar is for an inappropriate purpose.

The reaction of the majority of the tribes reveals two significant things about them. Unlike the previous generation of Israelites, they do not take idolatry or unauthorized worship lightly. They have learned, both from God's commands and from their own past history, that idol worship leads swiftly to spiritual disaster. They also know that even sacrifices to the living God will be rejected if they are offered improperly. On the other hand, they do not seem to have much trust in their brothers across the Jordan, since they are so quick to assume the worst about them.

Fortunately, they have the self-control to take a simple but very wise step before initiating an armed conflict. They send a small delegation, representing each of their tribes, to investigate the situation personally and to issue a grave warning to their brothers (22:13-20). In response, the eastern tribes plead innocence, and explain why they have built the altar (22:21-29). They have no intention of worshiping false gods, nor do they intend to offer any sacrifices at all on this altar. Their sole purpose was to have a visible reminder, which they refer to as a replica, of the original tabernacle, especially as a sign to their children.

So the situation ends peacefully, with mutual encouragement between the tribes (22:30-34). This sequence of events holds some important lessons for us. How often do we form a negative opinion about another believer, or about an entire group of believers, based solely on the statements of a third party? We cannot, of course, personally investigate everything that others say to us about someone else, but if and when we find ourselves developing anger or resentment towards someone, based on something we have not verified personally, this situation in Joshua should instruct us.

What a tragic disaster it would have been if the majority of tribes had immediately attacked, without first asking the right questions. Indeed, how many tensions, suspicions, and resentments are there among Christians today, for essentially the same reason? This incident is one vivid example of why we ought to be slow to judge one another.

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WHEREVER YOU GO: THE BOOK OF JOSHUA

Week Eighteen: Renewing the Covenant (Joshua 23-24)

The book of Joshua closes fittingly, with the renewing of the covenant that God had made with his people. The final two chapters of the book also describe Joshua's personal farewell to the people, in which he himself exhorts them to remain true to the covenant. First to the leaders of Israel, and then with all of the people, Joshua issues a solemn call to remain true to the God that has brought them all into the Promised Land.

As Joshua's life draws to a close, he summons the leaders of the nation, and addresses them (chapter 23). He reminds them of what God has done, and of the obstacles that they could not have overcome on their own. He reminds them that there are still dangers, distractions, and temptations around them. The pagan nations nearby, with their rampant immorality, violence, and idolatry, should never be allowed to become an influence. In view of the spiritual struggles that the nation would go through in later generations, Joshua's warning is a wise one indeed.

Joshua then assembles all of the tribes at Shechem (24:1) and he begins his final address by recounting in detail the victories God had given them over powerful enemies (24:2-13). In fact, throughout the Old Testament, God constantly reminds his people of the many things he has done for them in the past. God knows that our human nature is often short-sighted, as we often forget the ways he has helped us before, and lose faith that he will help in our present needs and trials. We also would do well to follow Joshua's example, and frequently to remind ourselves of the things that God has done for us in the past, so that we can trust him in the future.

Joshua then issues his call for the people to choose in their hearts whether to serve the living God or to follow idols and live for material things (24:14-15). He indicates that he and his household intend to serve the Lord always, regardless of what anyone else may do. His statement in these verses is remembered for good reason, as it is an example of exactly the kind of resolve that each of us ought to have. We should be determined in our hearts that we will remain faithful to God and to his truth, even when others are too weak or too fearful to do so.

When the people affirm several times that they are indeed willing to remain faithful (24:16-24), Joshua then leads them in a formal renewing of the covenant, with all of its requirements and promises (24:25-27). He thus reminds them once more that serving God is not a temporary pursuit or a mere pastime, but rather is meant to fill our entire lives, and is meant to last for our entire lifetimes.

Then it is time for Joshua to pass from the scene (24:28-33), and for a new era to begin for God's people. No leader, no generation lasts forever on this earth. As the book of Joshua illustrates, each generation must take over where the previous one left off, and must do its best to give the next generation what it in turn will need to worship and to serve God in spirit and in truth.

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