

Entering the Promised Land Joshua 1

For many (most?) of us, the Old Testament is a closed book. Literally.

Closed because we do not read it. Closed because when we do read it, we do not understand it. Closed because it does not seem to apply to our lives. Or closed because somewhere we picked up the idea that it has been superseded by the New Testament, and is no longer God's Word for his people.

All this is ironic. Ironic because the Old Testament is the Bible Jesus used. In fact, in his day, it was not the *Old* Testament, it was the *Only* Testament. It was the Bible. Ironic because the authors of the New Testament did not conceive of themselves as superseding the Bible. Instead, they quoted and alluded to it extensively. Ironic, most of all, because the Old Testament is not all that hard to understand or to apply today, if we put a little effort into it.

So we embark on this exploration of Joshua much as he embarked on the invasion of Palestine: with recognition of the challenges ahead of us, coupled with a sense of adventure as we follow where God leads.

Day 1: Joshua 1:1-2 The king is dead! Long live the king!

Could there be a worse time to transition from one leader to another than when the nation is on the verge of invading a new country in search of a permanent home? That is the situation Israel faces here, and Joshua, too. Moses was a great leader: he rescued his people from slavery to the world's preeminent superpower, and kept the massive throng fed and safe during forty years wandering in a barren wilderness. He was a great leader, but also a sinner. So, as punishment, God kept him from entering the promised land. Leadership passed to Joshua just as a new generation was about to face a massive crisis. Joshua and Israel knew that their proposed invasion would face fierce resistance, a fight to the death. What a time to change leaders! No wonder God tells Joshua, "Be strong and courageous!" (1:6), "Be strong and courageous!" (1:9). Even the people tell Joshua, "Be strong and courageous!" (1:18).

These words anticipate – but also contrast with – Jesus' words as he prepares his disciples for his impending death, by promising to send the Spirit: The Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid. (John 14:26-27). Jesus' death leaves a vacuum in the earliest days of the Church. His mantle passes less to the disciples than to the Holy Spirit, who is similarly available to us today as we take our responsibilities in the mission of God.

Day 2: Joshua 1:3-5 Where Joshua fits in the grand scheme of things

The entire Old Testament traces the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham. In fact, the story actual stretches as far back as the creation narrative in Genesis 1-2. Eden is characterized entirely by bliss: warmth between God and man, intimacy between man and woman, harmony between man and nature. The fall in Genesis destroys all that: God judges mankind, man and woman recriminate, man fights with nature and woman with childbirth. God starts anew with a solitary person and a single people (Gen 12:1-3). He calls Abraham, and makes him three promises: (1) innumerable descendants, (2) a land to call his own, and (3) that he would one day be the channel for God's blessing to flow to all the other nations of the world.

The second half of Genesis records the fulfillment of the first promise: innumerable descendants. Abraham begets Isaac, who begets Jacob, then twelve patriarchs; seventy people enter Egypt, and by the time the book of Exodus begins, they are a throng too numerous to number. The first promise fulfilled, God goes to work on the second, a land for Israel to call its own. Exodus brings Israel out of Egypt and into the wilderness. God leads them to Sinai where he sets out his expectations of them: the Ten Commandments. Even while Moses is on Mount Sinai taking delivery of these tablets, Israel is in the plain beneath, creating a new god and worshipping in an orgy (Exodus). God provides more detailed guidelines (Leviticus). He then invites them to enter their new land. Frightened, they refuse, and so he sentences them to forty years more in the wilderness (Numbers). They patch things up again (Deuteronomy), and God again invites them to enter the land. This is where Joshua takes up the story. Will this generation obey where their fathers did not?

More importantly for us ... will we succeed where that first generation failed? After Jesus' resurrection, God moved beyond the promise of land for Israel to bring blessing to all the nations of the world. That is the task to which Jesus called his disciples in Matthew 28:18-20 and in Acts 1:6-8. It is a task which remains disturbingly incomplete after two millennia. Our church is heavily engaged in this task. What more can we do collectively? What more can you do individually to advance the completion of the task?

Day 3: Joshua 1:6-8 Blessed on one condition

God offered Abraham three promises (land, descendants, conduit of blessing to the nations), but he also laid down one condition: obedience. As God promises to bring Joshua and Israel into the land, he reiterates this condition: "Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go." Immediately he reiterates the requirement: "Do not let this Book of the Law

depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it.” Only then will Joshua and Israel “be prosperous and successful.” This is not salvation – or prosperity – by works; this is simply reciprocation. God initiates the blessing by grace; Israel does nothing to earn or deserve it. But the blessings of God are only for those who are in relationship with him. So they are available only to those who respond to him with love and obedience.

With Bible in hand, we can read ahead and hear how the rest of the story turns out for Israel. God fulfills his second promise, and Israel mostly conquers the new land (Joshua). But they never keep God’s requirements. Instead, they stumble along through sin, judgment, repentance and restoration (Judges). God tries to break the cycle by providing a perpetual ruler, a king, but before long these kings simply institutionalize national corruption. Eventually, God forces Israel off the land and into exile (1 Samuel - 2 Kings).

Jesus expects obedience no less of his followers today. A key component in the Great Commission is this requirement: “... obey everything I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:20). Oddly, many Christians consider that salvation is solely about grace and faith. God required obedience in Joshua’s time, and in Jesus’ time. Is obedience suddenly optional today?

Day 4: Joshua 1:5-11 Divine presence and assistance

Three times God promises, or the people pray for, his presence. “As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you” (1:5). “The Lord your God will be with you wherever you go” (1:9). “May the Lord your God be with you as he was with Moses” (1:17). In Scripture this does not mean simply God’s presence, but also his assistance in the formidable task: “Take possession of the land the Lord your God is giving you” (1:13). They must fight for the land, yet they are not left on their own; God actively assists them.

This is the same promise that Jesus makes to his disciples and to us, in the formidable task which he sets for them and us: “Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matt 28:20). This is not a promise merely to live among us, or even to comfort us when life is hard. It is a promise to strengthen us for our task, and to work with us and through us toward the completion of that task.

Day 5: Joshua 1:12-15 Not their task alone

For the most part, the promised land lies beyond the Jordan, but not entirely. Two and a half tribes have already taken possession of their land, east of the Jordan river. Their wives and children are safe. Their homes need work, their fields need planting, and their flocks need herding. It would be tempting

for them to settle down, and tend to their own lives and livelihoods, while the other tribes cross the Jordan to carve out land for themselves. So Joshua reminds the earlier group of the obligation they accepted when Moses first offered them land: their families may settle down, but their men must continue the battle until the entire nation has received land that. Only then may they return home to look after their own.

While the New Testament never draws this application, it is arguably legitimate for us to do so. (Perhaps his first disciples understood that Jesus' commission applied across the board, so that they never needed to address the problem that we sometimes face.) Sometimes the assumption is that responsibility for fulfilling the Great Commission lies with missionaries, rather than with the entire church. The rest of us may provide some financial support. Perhaps we pray for a missionary or two. But do we, like the two-and-a-half tribes, recognize our equal responsibility, alongside our missionaries, to fulfill the missions mandate? Or do we abdicate, as Joshua feared that they might, pursuing our own comfort and safety, leaving our missionaries to bear the brunt of the work and sacrifice needed to fulfill the Great Commission?

Day 6: Joshua 1:16-18 What you tell us we will do; where you send us, we will go. This may well be the high point of the book: the Israelites embrace Joshua's exhortation, promising to do whatever he commands, and to go wherever he sends. Of course, it does not take them long to break these promises (see Joshua 7). But at least they start well, even if they stumble occasionally along the way.

Jesus commissions his church today, as he commissioned his first disciples: "Go and make disciples of all nations..." There is nothing we can say to bring greater joy to him than this: "Whatever you have commanded us we will do, and wherever you send us we will go." Is he calling more of us than are currently going? Even those whom he does not send anywhere, he still commands to partner with those whom he does send.

This commission is two thousand years old, and still unfulfilled. This is explicable only on the assumption that there have been a lot of people over the years who have not done what he commanded, or gone where he sent. Let this not be said of us as a church, or of us as individuals. Let this be the prayer of each of us for the duration of the Joshua series: "God, what are you commanding me to do? Where are you sending me to go?" Let this be the resolve of each of us for the duration of the Joshua series: "I will do what you command; I will go where you send."