

A Leader and his Successor

Joshua 12:1-24

To us, Joshua 12 may seem like a pointless litany of cities and kings conquered by Israel as they entered the new land. But it is not pointless. The list makes one central point that is both theological and pragmatic, and is also intensely relevant to us today. At the same time, it is a point with considerable background, so we take a step back, in order to begin at the beginning.

Day 1: Numbers 27:12-23 Moses and Joshua

Israel has been through two crises in succession: they fled superpower Egypt and its pursuing army, and they wandered forty years in a wilderness without a natural supply of food or water. They survived both crises, but only because Moses, so to speak, carried them on his back. God provided for the people and guided them through Moses; Moses interceded on behalf of the people and cajoled God into forgiving their sin rather than destroying them. Now Moses is about to die (27:12-14).

Moses requests that God provide a new leader to guide the nation, lest they wander around aimlessly, “like sheep without a shepherd” (27:15-17). So God calls Joshua, whose primary qualification is that (a) he has proven himself faithful to God, and thus, (b) evidences possession of the Spirit of God (27:18). To establish Joshua’s authority, God has Moses commission his replacement in front of the entire community (27:19-20).

We cite this text primarily for its reference to the appointment of Joshua as Moses’ replacement, a thread that continues through the rest of this week’s readings. At the same time, we note additionally that the New Testament picks up this same language to describe Jesus’ era. Though his contemporaries had priest and high priest, Pharisee and Sadducee, they were “harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (Matt 9:36). In response to this need, Jesus calls for prayer for God to send out workers into his harvest field (Matt 9:37-38). God’s people always need leaders, but leaders who are faithful, godly, Spirit-directed, commissioned by God and community, leaders who serve the flock of God under his authority and supervision. (And leaders need sheep who follow and pray for their shepherds.)

Day 2: Deuteronomy 31:1-8 Moses and Joshua

This passage expands on the preceding one. Numbers spent considerable time on the background to Joshua’s calling, but was terse on his commissioning: “Moses ... laid his hands on him and commissioned him” (Num 27:22-23). Deuteronomy fills out that narrative. In some of his last words before death,

Moses promises Israel that God will continue to fight for the nation as they invade the new land (31:1-5). Fortified by this promise, he exhorts them: “Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the Lord your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you” (31:6). Moses then addresses Joshua in much the same words: “Be strong and courageous, for you must go with this people into the land that the Lord swore to their forefathers to give them ... The Lord himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged” (31:7-8). Both the nation and its leader have the same promise: God will be with them, to assist and protect, so neither need fear.

This passage illustrates the interplay between divine leadership and human leadership. Moses calls Israel to trust God for their well-being. At the same time, he appoints Joshua to lead and guide them. God cares for his people, yet he generally does so not directly, but through appointing and empowering godly leaders.

Day 3: Joshua 1:1-18 Joshua and Moses

Among Moses’ last formal acts before his death – and among the last words of the book of Deuteronomy – is the commissioning of Joshua. The book of Joshua begins on the same note: Moses has died, so God calls Joshua to take up the mantle of leadership. Repeatedly God connects the two leaders: “I will give you every place where you set your foot, as I promised Moses” (1:3). “As I was with Moses, so I will be with you” (1:5). God also lays down the same expectation on the new generation and its leadership: “Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you” (1:7).

When Joshua in turn addresses the people, he adopts the same approach, invoking Moses’ authority: “Remember the command that Moses the servant of the LORD gave you” (1:13); “After that, you may go back and occupy your own land, which Moses the servant of the LORD gave you east of the Jordan toward the sunrise” (1:15).

Finally, when the people respond to Joshua, they pick up this same theme: “Just as we fully obeyed Moses, so we will obey you [are they serious?!]. Only may the LORD your God be with you as he was with Moses” (1:17).

Moses casts a long shadow. A strikingly contemporary human dynamic is at play here. One of the hardest transitions for a church occurs when a successful founding or long-term pastor resigns or dies. In fact, the foremost church consultant advises pastors: “Never be the first successor. Be the third.” After a long pastorate, it is so hard for people to make the transition that they typically chew up his initial successor. Often the second replacement provides a bridge period for people to adjust to work out their grief and to adjust to the change.

Then, after four or five years, the church is ready for a permanent pastor.

Of course, God does not have the luxury of following this wisdom. Israel is in transition between a barren wilderness and a violent invasion. Their survival depends on a rapid and smooth leadership change at the most volatile possible time. The nation would have been horrified: they are about to face the worst possible crisis without the leader who has carried them thus far. In their anxiety – and Joshua’s, too – God promises continuity between their two leaders; in fact, he promises to *be* their continuity: “I will be with you.”

Day 4: Joshua 12:1-24 Joshua and Moses

The previous readings supply the backdrop for the point of this chapter. Moses had died at the worst possible time, as Israel invaded the promised land and faced a series of battles-to-the-death. God promised that he would be with Joshua as he had been with Moses. Now, in Joshua 12, the nation has largely conquered the new land, and it is time for a progress report. The central theme of this chapter: God did all that he promised, and spectacularly so; he was with Joshua just as much as – if not more than – he was with Moses. The proof? Moses led Israel to victory over two kings and their cities before they crossed the Jordan; after they crossed the Jordan, Joshua led Israel to victory over an entire litany of cities and their kings, from Jericho to Tirzah. “Moses ... and the Israelites” conquered *two* cities and kings; “Joshua and the Israelites” conquered *thirty-one*.

This is a statement about Joshua, that he was no less effective a leader than the historic and dynamic Moses. But even more, it is a statement about God: that he provides leadership for his people. Moreover, this statement is recorded in Scripture so that all generations learn this same lesson: that God provides leadership for his people, to guide them through whatever crisis they face. On top of it all, it is an exhortation – or perhaps two exhortations – to the people of God: (a) to pray fervently asking God to provide such leadership; and, (b) to follow the leader(s) whom God provides.

Day 5: John 16:6-15 Jesus and the Holy Spirit

All that’s fine for Israel in its early years, but that is all a very long time ago. It is a long time ago for us. It was even a long time ago for Jesus’ disciples as they face a comparable crisis. Just as Moses was about to die, so is Jesus. Just as Moses died at an inopportune time, so does Jesus. Just as Israel was about to embark on an insurmountable task, so are the first disciples. What will become of them without Jesus?

Notably, while Jesus assigned Peter some additional role beginning after the resurrection (Matt 16:13-20), Peter is no replacement for Jesus. That role

belongs to the Holy Spirit. "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever – the Spirit of Truth... You know him for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you" (John 14:16-18). A second time Jesus promises, "All this I have spoken while still with you. But the Counselor, 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" (John 14:26). And a third time, in John 16:6-15, Jesus promises the Spirit as his replacement, a second Counselor even more effective than the first: he will convict the world of its guilt (John 16:8-11), and he will guide the Church into truth (John 16:13-15).

This is the Spirit who is with us still today. He empowers the gospel as we evangelize nonbelievers, and he illumines the Church as we seek God through Scripture. Jesus is not a relic of the ancient past; he is ever-present with us through the Spirit whom he gives us, individually sure, but all the more collectively. Rather than suffering deficit because of Jesus' absence, his mission moves ahead across many fronts as his people are empowered by the Spirit.

Day 6: Acts 1:1-8 What all this means for us

Just as the work of God moved ahead through the Israelites after the transition from Moses to Joshua, so the work of God moves ahead through the Church after the transition from Jesus to the Spirit. The entire book of Acts pounds home that point.

This holds two implications for us.

First, as we engage in the work of God, we look primarily not to any human leader but to the Spirit. Moses, a divinely-authorized and divinely-empowered leader could be replaced by Joshua well enough, but the Son of God can be replaced only by the Spirit of God. Ultimately it is his Spirit who guides us collectively (and individually), as we pray humbly and fervently. This does not deny the continued value and role of human leaders, who need our prayers and deserve our respect. But our faith and our welfare depend not on our human leaders, but on the Spirit of God. And praise and accolades belong not to any human leader, but to the Spirit of God.

Secondly, the Spirit comes so that the work of God can continue; in fact, so that it broadens and deepens. The Spirit comes not to comfort, but to empower, not to make us feel good, but to impel us into ministry and into the world. So collectively as a church, and individually, as recipients of his Spirit, we rightly consider how we might best further his work in this world. We do not seek to replace Jesus; but we must continue his work as his replacement lives in us and works through us. Empowered by the Spirit, what is your contribution: what one particular thing above all else do you do in order to further the work of Jesus?