

Be Strong and Courageous

Think about those critical junctures of life when you had to make a choice



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that would impact others: responsibility for a newborn child, a management role over employees or company policies, partnership in a key business deal, leadership in a community or school. These days we are

witnessing distressing leadership failures in government and corporations that are hurting people, often the most vulnerable people in our society.

Consider Joshua, neither president nor corporate magnate, but God's chosen leader for thousands of people who know nothing but the hardships of a wilderness and must now become an organized nation. God says: "My servant Moses is dead. Now proceed to cross the Jordan, you and all these people, into the land that I am giving to them, to the Israelites" (v. 2). Opportunity – or nightmare? God goes on to define the scope of the territory Israel is receiving. I vividly remember the day my first child was born and that night when I began to think seriously about my daughter's future, my responsibilities, and the challenges she would face. My prayer was simple and direct: "God of grace, I can't do this alone ... I need your help!" The years have not been without complication, but the faithfulness of God has never been in question.

Joshua's moment of challenge, and Israel's, is a remarkable account of God's love, faithfulness, and grace. Moses, who had been God's leader of Israel since their deliverance from slavery in Egypt, as well as over Israel's tragic failures for forty years in the wilderness, has died. Joshua and Caleb alone survived that ordeal. The new generation did not know slavery firsthand, only the tragic stories. They did not know what it was like to be connected to a land, or to organize and function as a nation. But they had two resources on which to build: Joshua, who had been with them through every blessing and challenge; and, the singular necessity of God, who loved them. As we examine the amazing story, we recognize that the great leaders of biblical history were not

perfect, and they did not intuitively know all the right answers; but they, like us, were on a journey discovering God.

God's directive to Joshua are what pastor and author Jason Edwards summarizes as: "be confident, be courageous, and be diligent." Nowhere does God say it will be easy, but they will be victorious when God is at the center. Sounds like a life plan!

The plan begins with: "Now proceed to cross the Jordan" (v. 2). For their confidence God promises "every place that the sole of your foot will tread" is yours! (v. 3). The physical description of the "promised land" fits what became Israel's borders under the rule of King David. The idea of confidence in the Christian life is nowhere near "you will get everything you want," but, as the Apostle Paul writes: "I can do all things through Him who strengthens me" (Philippines 4:12).

When God first began calling me to ministry I told him: "You are making a mistake ... this is the kid who panics just giving a book report in front of his class!" It took a year and a half for God to convince me his call would work. Confidence, trusting God, does not mean everything will play out with the absence of challenges, but that you can overcome. Joshua's story shows remarkable victories again and again because he trusted God.

Confidence is the foundation of courage. Three times in this text God tells Joshua to be strong and courageous (vv. 6,7,9). What a foundation to act out of faith: "As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you" (v. 5).

The Matthew gospel ends with Jesus saying his final words to his apostles before ascending to heaven: Teach all who follow me ... "to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:20). Both the Old and New Testaments are filled with remarkable examples of men and women who dared, against all the ideas of the world, to act on their faith, showing the world a better way to live and overcoming evil in all its destructive forms.

In what seemed to be almost

impossible circumstances, God calls Joshua to a diligent leadership, a determination based on God's faithfulness over forty years in the wilderness. There were plenty of hardships and failures to look back on over those forty years, but there were even more remarkable experiences of God's love and care for the Israel that was yet to be.

This diligence is not just determination, but a return to the truth of God's unwavering love and the law that must shape Israel as God's distinct people. The great law, the core of that defining law, is: "Hear, O Israel: the Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (Deuteronomy 6:4-5). Read the rest of that text (vv. 6-9) to see the diligence or determination necessary to live as God's people.

For forty years the exiles had wandered in circles because they regularly forgot what it means to be God's people. If we dare to be honest with ourselves we must admit that our forgetting is really a careless neglect of God's love and our comfort with self-serving motives. For descendants of the exiles who had earlier turned back from entering the "promised land" there was now a second chance.

Although this saga is not a teaching parable, it does confront us as Christians in a challenging world to live a different lifestyle, shaped by God's grace instead of the quiet indifference of our culture. If we forget God and the transforming example of Jesus, we will be no more than lost nomads in history. We are hearing too many religious voices these days ignoring biblical teachings, turning away from the example and words of Jesus, and leading us into a spiritual wilderness.

This Joshua text has an incisive message for us. God loves us. Christ is the only remedy for our self-centered motivations. We are wandering in a kind of wilderness of our own making, a place of divisions, injustice, prejudice, and selfishness. Yet, God, in his grace, is ready to welcome us into his promises if we will only choose to live in his love. Will you dare to be strong and courageous?