

The Story: The Land of the Promise
By Jason Huff
Psalm 24, Ephesians 6:10-18, Joshua 1:1-9

Our final Scripture reading this morning comes from Joshua 1:1-9. Listen now to the Word of God. “After the death of Moses the servant of the LORD, the LORD said to Joshua son of Nun, Moses' aide: "Moses my servant is dead. Now then, you and all these people, get ready to cross the Jordan River into the land I am about to give to them – to the Israelites. I will give you every place where you set your foot, as I promised Moses. Your territory will extend from the desert to Lebanon, and from the great river, the Euphrates – all the Hittite country – to the Great Sea on the west. No one will be able to stand up against you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you. Be strong and courageous, because you will lead these people to inherit the land I swore to their forefathers to give them. Be strong and very courageous. 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. 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. Then you will be prosperous and successful. Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go.”

When I was a kid, Joshua was the book of the Bible I loved to read. It was like the best of Star Wars and Flash Gordon and G. I. Joe put together, only in ancient times. Every collection of Bible stories included Jericho. And that's no surprise...what's not for a young boy to like in Joshua? There's a charismatic main figure, heroes who trust in God, swordfights and battles galore. After forty years of wandering in the desert, the Israelites come out swinging.

As we get older, though, it becomes one of the more difficult books for us to manage. As we read chapter 7 in *The Story* and start dealing with the story of Joshua, we get a little uncomfortable. What is God doing through the Israelite invasion of the land? What does this say about war? Unless you read between the lines, it's easy to make the case that this is a book of bloodshed that seems far removed from the way God normally works.

But if we take a few moments to understand the conquest of the Holy Land, we can see just what God is accomplishing and why. And beyond that, Joshua is not just a book of history. Joshua is a book that teaches us a lot about the way to live our lives outside of wartime...and it reminds us why we need a savior. So let's take a look at what exactly we're dealing with in the book of Joshua.

The story begins with God commissioning Joshua for the job ahead of him, encouraging him to be strong and courageous numerous times. Joshua assembles the Israelites, and God parts the Jordan River much like He parted the Red Sea for the previous generation. The Israelites make it across, they make camp, and they commit to God's covenant through circumcision. Then comes the famous battle at Jericho. Spies investigate the city, which is in terror of the Israelites, and they are hidden by a prostitute named Rahab. She risks her life to hide them, and they rescue her and her family when the city is destroyed.

The army of Israel circles Jericho six times over six days. On the seventh day, they circle the city seven times, the walls of the massively fortified city come down, and the Israelites pour in. What's fascinating is that archeologists found evidence not only of the wall and its fall but that it fell outward. Siege works like a battering ram would have always pushed a city's walls inward. Evidence of God at work? I think so.

We hear about Jericho a lot, but many of the other battles the Israelites fought in the promised land were no less miraculous. We read that Joshua stretched out his javelin at the city of Ai, and he didn't rest his hand until his men had completely destroyed it. Joshua didn't even have to personally participate – the battle was God's to win. Soon afterwards, the five kings of the Amorites come together to try and stop the Israelites. In the midst of the Israelites, Joshua asks God to stop the sun and moon until they had achieved victory. How this happened we have no idea, but Scripture tells us this is exactly what occurred – and that it's never happened before or since. This was not the work of a great army or fantastic soldiers. At every stop along the way, we see God intervening to give His people the land He promised their ancestors.

What's so amazing about this generation of Israel is that they genuinely want to do what God has commanded. After the battle of Ai, Joshua reads every last word of the law Moses had handed down...without protest. No less than four times, the Israelites agree to God's covenant, either by word or action, in the book of Joshua. In fact, this is one of the very few times we can point to in Israel's history where the vast majority of the Hebrews served God faithfully.

That doesn't mean that everything goes smoothly. The first time the Israelites attack the city of Ai, they fail because a man named Achan took items from Jericho, which was to be totally and utterly destroyed. It's not until Achan is punished that the campaign can go forward. Later on, Joshua makes a big error when he makes a treaty with the Gibeonites. The Gibeonite envoy makes their clothes and supplies look ratty from a long journey. But they were, in fact, neighbors! Because Joshua and the Israelites forgot to inquire to God, they had to honor their treaty. And while the Israelites conquer 31 kings, they stop short of taking the whole land. They are loyal to God, but their obedience is incomplete. Despite these setbacks, for roughly two generations, God grants them peace as they enjoy the land He's given them.

Now before we go any further, I want to deal with the issue of the takeover of the land. Over time, two very wrong things have happened with the book of Joshua. It's been said that God commands genocide in the takeover of the Promised Land – something God punished the Egyptians for when they attempted to do it to the Israelites. It has been also been abused to justify warfare in general. We need to dig into the details to find out why these are both false.

First, we need to remember that God told Abraham about His plan six hundred years before the Israelites entered the land from the wilderness. God said specifically that He was going to drive out the inhabitants from the land due to their wickedness. Many of the inhabitants were related to Abraham, either through Ishmael or Esau. They had heard long ago what would eventually happen. The Israelites, all million of them, were on the edge of the promised land in Kadesh-Barnea forty years earlier. The warnings had gone out throughout the whole land: the gods of Egypt have been destroyed by the God of Israel, and He is bringing His people to settle here! Many, many Canaanites left the region to avoid the coming Israelites and were spared.

Second, the Canaanites were being punished by God, and history shows us why. The Canaanites had long practiced brutality and immorality and called them their religion. Child sacrifice was common. Both male and female prostitutes were a part of their worship, and some of their practices were unspeakable. For centuries, theft and murder and sexual immorality were part and parcel of their culture, men and women alike involved. God finally said, “enough.”

Those two points show that this was not genocide but punishment of those who refused to leave. But what does it say about war today? In the book of Joshua, God specifically outlines the areas and peoples that make up the promised land. God commands the Israelites not to take the lands that belonged to the descendants of Abraham’s nephew Lot and Isaac’s son Esau. Certain peoples who had shown kindness to the Israelites were to be left alone. God’s plans are specific – the Israelites are taking over a particular people at a particular place and time for particular purposes: to punish the Canaanites and to make God’s name known. These specifics do not translate over into other conflicts, even within Israel’s own history. This war does not justify any others; nor does it set precedent. These are difficult issues, admittedly, but they can be reasoned out, and if you’d like to talk about them more, I encourage you to come to our Wednesday night Bible study where we can go more in-depth into these issues.

So let’s move on. What is in this book for us today? There are three lessons I was able to see in this chapter that apply today. First is this: God calls us to personal responsibility towards Him. Second, God asks us to trust in His power and not our own. Finally, God shows us the need for a Savior greater than ourselves.

Our actions count for something; we have personal responsibility towards God. That’s the first point we see in today’s study. Rahab is almost certainly a religious prostitute. Her job was part of the religious culture of Canaan. But something very important happens when she hides the spies from Israel. When she does that, she is not just risking her life. She is putting her old life behind her. She was once defined by what she did and the gods she served. When she changes sides, she is experiencing a spiritual death and rebirth. She is no longer the religious harlot; instead, she is claiming the God of Israel for her own. Her actions are not insignificant. There are only four women mentioned in the genealogy of Jesus, and Rahab is one of them. Her change of heart not only saved her entire family, but she became a part of Jesus’ own lineage.

On the other hand, there is Achan. While he is fighting in Jericho, he covets a beautiful robe and some gold and silver, and he takes them for himself. Everything in Jericho was to be completely destroyed for the LORD, but Achan disobeys. When the Israelites first attack Ai, they think they’ll take it easily, but God is not with them, and 36 men die as they flee...all because of the sin of one man. Achan is found out, and everything he has and his whole family is destroyed. Had Achan been patient, he would have received his share – in many cities, God allowed the Israelites to keep what they found. But his disobedience cost him everything.

God desires to teach us the same truth. He calls on us to obey Him and to keep faith with Him. The Israelites were circumcised before they went into battle, and after Achan’s sin was purged from the community, the whole law was read to them again. They were making sure they stayed in step with God. When God was with the Israelites, blessing what they did, they never failed.

We need to be of the same mindset. God is calling us to be a Rahab, to leave behind our gods and to follow Him instead. What gods do we carry around with us today? It seems ironic to me that on one day in November, we give thanks to God for everything we have, and then the very next day, we go out and buy everything we don't have. For every hour of TV we watch, we see about fourteen minutes of commercials trying to get us to covet something. What would it be like for us to really live out Rahab's conversion? What would it be like if we ditched our profession and said, "God, what would *you* have me do with my life?" What if we ditched the things we hold dear in this world and said, "God, what is it that *you* find important?" What if all that meant risking life and limb and wealth to protect the innocent or reach the lost or whatever it is God calls you to do?

It's a difficult thing I'm asking of you today, but it's God's desire. If God is your life, He wants you to be close to Him. This week's passage shows us the consequences of taking that seriously or taking it lightly. Don't take God lightly. We can laugh and joke and have fun together in the church because God has given us joy. We belong to Him; we can celebrate! But that doesn't mean that we don't treat God with the utmost respect – and to respect Him means we have a personal responsibility to do what He says.

The second call this week is to trust in God's power and not our own. You know, this was an awesome time to be an Israelite. All the whining and complaining of the desert wanderings is over. God stops the Jordan so we can cross over. We walk around a city and the walls topple over. Joshua points a spear at a city and we take it. Joshua prays and it stays light for twenty-four hours. God did amazing things for the Israelites in the desert and they were too blind to notice. This generation gets it, and it's pretty awesome.

What's so amazing is that they don't try to win in their own power. They faithfully participate in the battles, and these giants are falling right at their feet. God is making it all happen. And that's a huge lesson for us. Last week, we said that God is our giant-killer. This week, we see it in action. There is no situation too hard for God to handle.

But here's the thing...for audacious acts of God to happen, we need to ask and we need to participate. Do we want to see this nation turn towards God again? It can happen. Do we want to see the world reached for Christ? It can happen. Can there be prosperity in Detroit again? It can happen. God can bring people of all races together. He can heal the sick. He can raise the dead. He's done it before and will do it again. But we have to ask. When Joshua saw that the sun was going down before the Israelites could complete their victory, he asked boldly for something wildly audacious, and it happened. We don't get how it happened, but it did!

How often do we approach God like this? Don't pray maybe prayers. Pray confident prayers. Say, God, if this is Your will, I don't have to understand how you do it, just do it! God, if this is what you have in mind, move heaven and earth and make it happen! We pray small, timid little prayers, afraid that God isn't there if they don't get answered, or afraid God will be mad at us if we ask for too much. But we who are believers are the adopted sons and daughters of the Eternal King! He wants to lavish His gifts upon us...not gifts of gold or silver, not gifts of enormous wealth or everything we could ever want on this earth, but gifts that will last for eternity. Get your will in line with His and then pray boldly!

Then be willing to be a part of the solution of carrying those prayers out. If God has put it on your heart to pray for missions, do it...and then find out how you can help. If God has put the poor on your heart, pray...and then get involved with our food pantry or a local mission. Seek God's will, show God you mean what you pray for, and God will be happy to answer your daring prayers. God wants to reveal His glory to us and to the world, just like He did with the Israelites...so ask Him to do it here and now.

Finally, this passage shows us the need for a Savior greater than ourselves. You see, Joshua is one of the best leaders in all of Israel's history. In fact, Joshua's name in ancient Hebrew is the same name as Jesus. It has the same meaning: "God saves." You can say very little negative about what he did. The only thing you can say against him is what he did not do. He did not inquire of God about the Gibeonites, and he did not complete the conquest.

We heard earlier how the Gibeonites tricked the Israelites into making a pact with them. It was an understandable mistake, but one that could have been avoided had Joshua thought to turn to God about it. We also see everybody go home before the tribes have the lands God promised. After warring through all these little mini-kingdoms, the Israelites decide, well...that's good enough. They split up the lands they've already got and each tribe goes its separate way. But the problem is, lots of Canaanites still remain. They will eventually war with Israel. They'll wage campaigns against the new inhabitants, sure, but there will also be a spiritual war against Israel. Through Canaanite women, the Israelites are enticed to follow other gods and to practice immorality rather than to serve the one true God, the God of Israel.

God doesn't fault Joshua for this failure as He does the Israelite community as a whole. Joshua couldn't lead warriors that just wouldn't go. But still, at the end of the day, it falls on his shoulders. And all of us know what that is like. Even when we attempt to avoid sin and deny ourselves, when we strive to serve God and others, we fall short. Our faithfulness has limits.

That's why we celebrate the second Joshua this season...the Jesus who came as one of us, who eventually gave Himself for our redemption. He is the Jesus who said on the cross when everything was completed, "It is finished." He was obedient to God the Father even unto death, and the Father raised Him back to life again, the perfect and complete sacrifice for our sins having been made once and for all.

Jesus is our promised land. God gave the physical land to Israel, yet it has always been incomplete, divided by unfaithfulness and war and strife. But Jesus is perfect. He is given to us when we believe in Him by faith, and His Holy Spirit dwells within us. He is flowing with the milk of righteousness and the fruit of faithful living. He will never disappoint us. No matter where we go, His promise will always be with us. And even when we fall short, He has completed the task – we can rely on Him to carry us when we fall.

As we close this morning, I encourage you with Joshua's final words to His people...choose for yourselves today whom you will serve. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD. Be responsible to Him and cling to Him. Boldly ask Him to accomplish His will in this world. And do it all in the name of Jesus who forgives us, who brings our faith to completion, who will never fail us, whose birth we celebrate this joyous season.