

## **Marching as to War: Be Strong and Courageous**

**Joshua 1:1-9**

By [Dr. J. Ligon Duncan](#)

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Now it came about after the death of Moses, the servant of the Lord that the Lord spoke to Joshua the son of Nun, Moses' servant, saying, "Moses My servant is dead; now therefore arise, cross this Jordan, you and all this people, to the land which I am giving to them, to the sons of Israel. Every place on which the sole of your foot treads, I have given it to you, just as I spoke to Moses. From the wilderness and this Lebanon, even as far as the great river, the river Euphrates, all the land of the Hittites, and as far as the Great Sea toward the setting of the sun, will be your territory. No man will be able to stand before you all the days of your life. Just as I have been with Moses, I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you. Be strong and courageous, for you shall give this people possession of the land that I swore to their fathers to give them. Only be strong and very courageous; be careful to do according to all the law which Moses my servant commanded you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, so that you may have success wherever you go. This book of law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it; for then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have success. Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous! Do not tremble or be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you where ever you go."

Amen. May God bless to us the reading of His holy and inerrant word.

At the end of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, it's actually at the beginning of book two, *The Two Towers*, Boromir is dead. He is lying, actually, sitting up next to a tree with arrows sticking in him from wild and savage Orcs. Aragorn comes up to him and Boromir says some words to him just before he dies. Aragorn then says, "Boromir has laid it on my to go to Minas Tirith, and my heart desires it, but where are the ring and the bearer? How shall I find them and save the quest from disaster?" Well of course if you haven't seen the movie or read the book, you don't know what I'm talking about. The words "how shall I save this quest from disaster" could very well have been words the Joshua could have spoken, because Moses is dead, and the people of God are still in the wilderness and

they have been there for forty years. The promises of God have yet to be fulfilled. How can I save this quest from disaster?

We've jumped ahead forty years from Exodus 19 this morning. Actually 39.75, if I'm accurate. We've jumped ahead all the way now to where the people of God are encamped on the eastern side of the Dead Sea in the plains of Moab, just at the point where they are about to enter, at last, the promised land Canaan.

It's perhaps opportune that we are looking at the book of Joshua now. Hollywood has seen fit to release a whole state of war movies. Perhaps you have seen some of them. In the wake of '911' it's alright now to be in favor of war. Brister and I were discussing the hymn, *Onward Christian Soldiers Marching As To War*, and Brister can remember a time when it was not okay to sing that hymn, when the militaristic overtones of that hymn were considered to be outside the pale of what Christianity were all about. Well, of course, here in the book of Joshua we are going to meet war and we are going to meet in the guise of a great hero of the Old Testament, namely captain Joshua. I suppose in terms of the four temperaments, Joshua could be described as choleric, robust, restless, forthright, never happier when he's engaged in some great project or other. People like that can be a little intimidating. God raises up such people to do His work.

## **I. The purposes of God never fail.**

Now, I want us to see in these opening nine verses several things that God taught Joshua, and in teaching Joshua underlined some fundamental principles about establishing the kingdom of God. The first of which is this, it's a principle that is taught in the very opening verses of Joshua chapter 1. Moses is dead but the purposes of God are not. Moses may well be dead, but the purposes of God are not. Isn't it startling how this book opens. In verse 2, this is God now speaking to Joshua, "Moses My servant is dead; now therefore arise, cross this Jordan, you and all this people to the land which I am giving to them, to the sons of Israel." Do you see the point? The work of God is not dependent on men.

It wouldn't be difficult to imagine that amongst the people of God, there may well be some misgivings now to the purposes and the plan of God now that Moses was dead, now that their great leader was gone. Having spent forty years in the wilderness, imagine that. Going back to 1961 or 62, to the very early, early days of the Beatles. How far back in your memory do you have to go to bring up those memories? It wouldn't be difficult to imagine that many, many amongst the people of God were beginning to think that perhaps the promises of God would never be fulfilled and now that Moses is dead, that's the end of it. Isn't it startling that the very first words in this book are, "Now that Moses is dead, now therefore arise and go and occupy that land which I promised to you." God's hand is the thing that God wants us to see here. It's not dependant upon man. That's not to

say that man is unimportant, that's not to say that man is insignificant. In the end, men and women are His servants who do His bidding. The kingdom of God does not ultimately depend on us. Look at how He puts it, "I, which I am giving to them." The emphasis is on sovereignty. The emphasis is on that which God is about to do.

That's a tremendously significant statement. For not only did it mean that the leader that they had known for the forty years was no longer standing in his place, it had a much deeper significance than that. It meant that the final judgment of God had now been expended. You remember the story, of course. Joshua was one of the spies that went into the land of Canaan and had brought back the report to Moses and the others. "It's a land that's full of milk and honey. It's a pleasant place, it's a wonderful place." Then there were others, in fact, the majority, who came back and said "it's full of giants and we dare not set out foot in it or else we're done for." Because of their refusal, God's judgment, you remember, came upon them and no one above the age of twenty, apart from Joshua, survived in order to enter the land of Canaan. They were all struck down with a plague, of course you haven't done that part of the story, that's in the story that's to come. We've jumped ahead now 39.75 years. That's the background. Do you remember that some of them did try, despite what God had said, and the Canaanites and the Amalekites came and stuck them down and they were beaten back. The first lesson you see is one of sovereignty. This is God's work, this is the Lord's work and He will accomplish it. I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. It's not dependant on man, it's not dependant on great men, it's not dependant on people like Moses, and there were few greater than Moses. When the men appeared at Jesus' transfiguration, it was Moses and Elijah that would represent the entirety of the period of the Old Testament. There are few greater than Moses, but the kingdom of God is not dependent on man.

Do you ever wonder what it was like for the early church in Asia minor in Turkey when the Apostle Paul died and the news of his death traveled from church to church along that early news grape vine before the days of the internet and email? Do you imagine how dejected the people of God must have felt towards the end of the first century when Paul, the great apostle, was dead? You can feel something of the angst that Paul himself felt when he writes Second Timothy as his last message to Timothy preparing the church indeed for that period of time. Can you imagine what the churches in North Africa felt in the fourth or fifth century when Augustine, the great St. Augustine finally died? Can you imagine what the people of God must have felt in the middle of the sixteenth century when Calvin died. I have a picture, not an original you understand, but there is a picture here in my office in the church, that scene when Calvin is a few days away from dying, just sitting in a chair. He's gaunt and thin as he was for most of his life, but even thinner and more gaunt just before his death and he is surrounded by some of the great men of Geneva and Theodore Beza and others are there. It's a wonderful poignant moving scene just before his death. Imagine

how they felt when the great John Calvin had died.

Well, let's bring it right down to our time because we've just lost in the last year or so, perhaps the dean of at least our branch of the evangelical and Reformed church in the name of Jim Boice. Yes it's a great loss, it's more of a loss than people can imagine. It's more of a loss than probably most of you realize. How great a loss he is to the Presbyterian Church in America. Yet, with all due respect to Jim Boice, who is sitting in heaven amongst the angels and archangels, the kingdom of God was not dependent on him either. Moses is dead, now go in and possess the land. It's about the purpose of God and the purpose of God is sure.

## **II. The certainty of God's promises.**

The second thing is closely related to it and it's the reason why the purpose of God is sure, and the reason why the purpose of God is sure is because God always keeps His promise. If the first thing that Joshua had to learn was about the purpose of God, the second thing was about the promise of God. Joshua stands at a moment of transition and at that moment he stands in need of all of the grace of God that is possible and one of the things that God says to Joshua, "Remember My promise." Verse four of "Onward Christian Soldiers" reads, 'Crowns and thrones may perish, kingdoms rise and wane, but the church of Jesus constant will remain, gates of hell can never against that church prevail, we have Christ's own promise and that can not fail.' That's precisely what God is saying here to Joshua in verse 3. "Every place on which the sole of your foot treads, I have given it to you just as I spoke to Moses. As I promised to Moses." It's like a refrain that goes through this entire chapter and it's as though God is saying to Joshua, 'feed your soul on the promises that can never, ever fail.'

Now God has strange ways of fulfilling His promises. Sometimes our lives can be falling apart and God is saying, 'I'm keeping My promise.' Sometimes the clouds may gather, sometimes the storms may break, sometimes lightning and thunder may crash into our lives, but God's promise is sure and certain. He's promised to bless us, He's promised to keep us, He's promised never to leave us or forsake us even when our lives look to be in ruins. God's promises are certain. That's what Joshua is being told. He can be trusted. God can be trusted. "Those who trust Him fully find Him wholly true," we sing.

You know what it is to trust someone? There is dependability about God, there is a rock like quality about the God of Israel. That is what made Jehovah, the covenant Lord of Israel so different from all of the surrounding deities of the Canaanites. The gods of the Canaanites were not dependable. The gods of the Canaanites were irascible, the gods of the Canaanites were given to fits of temper and moodiness. They were hot headed, they were bad tempered, but the covenant Lord of Israel was utterly dependable. His word was His bond. He had come to Abraham, He came to Isaac, He had come to Jacob, and He had come

to Moses and He had said, 'this is what I'm going to do and I'm going to do it, I will do it.' Like a little child you can come to God and you can say, "but Daddy, you promised." You promised to take them to Twin Lakes for a night. You know work, and business, and the weather is too cold and he says, "I'm not going to go." And the little child gets a hold of him and he says, "But you promised. You promised." Joshua is being told, learn to feed your soul on the promises of almighty God.

Now I wonder if Joshua was given these promises because, well, in some way he needed them. There is something about Joshua even though he is choleric, even though he's a strong military soldier, a 'Type A' personality. There is something about Joshua too, he constantly needs reassurance. Alec Matter, one of the Old Testament scholars, refers to Joshua as 'a most unlikely leader.' A most unlikely leader because it's as though God knows what he's like and He's strengthening him, He's reassuring him, He's well, perhaps we'd say, and don't run with it or make too much of it, but He's affirming him. Affirming him not in what he is in himself, but affirming him in what God is going to make of him.

### **III. The precepts of God.**

If the first point is about the purpose of God, the second point is about the promise of God and the third point has to do with the precepts of God. Do you notice in verses 6 through 8 that now God draws attention to His precepts, His law. The book of Joshua is a record of how the word of God, given to His people in the first five books of Moses, the principles of the kingdom of God as described in detail for example in the book of Deuteronomy, began now to be worked out in the lives of God's people. As Joshua is going to lead the people of God into the land of promise, one of the things that they must bear in mind is the role of the word of God in their lives. The role of the law.

Look at what he says in verse 8 especially. He says to him, "To be strong and very courageous and to be careful." Verse 7, "To do according to all the law which Moses My servant commanded to you." Then in verse 8, "this book of the law," perhaps referring to the book of Deuteronomy. Now, we have to have a right paradigm whenever we hear this word *law* because we tend to hear the word law and to think of detailed instructions that usually are telling us that we are doing something wrong. That probably says something more about our fallen nature than our understanding of God's law because in the Old Testament the law, the Torah, is thought of as something much broader than simply commands that lead to our condemnation. Rather the Torah, the law of God is that which makes us wise. That's a very different idea. "Which makes us wise," because if you follow God's law, if you heed God's law, you will be prosperous and successful.

Now don't take this as some health and wealth gospel. That's not what Moses is

saying, that's not what the book of Joshua is saying. No, you will be prosperous and successful in the sense that you will be wise if you heed God's law. Do you remember how the psalmist put it in Psalm 119: "Because I love your law, I have more wisdom than my elders." If you love God's law you can be wiser than those who are much older than you because you have the law of God as a liberating principle working itself out in your heart.

Samuel Bolton, and it's uncanny almost how this ties in with what Ligon was saying in Exodus 19 this morning in the very similar sort of passage. Samuel Bolton, who lived in the middle of the seventeenth century, was one of the Westminster divines who wrote *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, was raised and went to Christ College in Cambridge, and had a pastorate in London. He wrote a very important book that's still in print today, *The True Bounds of Christian Freedom*. This is how he put it, "The law drives us to the gospel to be saved and the gospel drives us to the law in order to help us how to live." The law drives us to the gospel and the gospel drives us to the law.

Now, two things that Joshua was told with respect to the precepts of God. First in verse 8, he is to meditate. This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night. He is to meditate on the word of God. He is to allow the law of God, the book of Deuteronomy, the law and all of its multi frailty to be like a diamond. Ladies, you've got that rock on your finger, given to you by someone that you love. Have you ever held it up to the light and allowed the light to shine through it and seen something of a multi faceted nature in the way in which that rock has been cut? Meditate on the law that way.

Let me change the metaphor. I've only discovered garlic really in the last few years. If you know me, I'm from Britain and we don't put a lot of seasoning in food. As a friend of mine here says, there are Italian restaurants, and Spanish restaurants, and there are Mexican restaurants, but there are no British restaurants. One of the strange things, and actually it can be a plus and actually it can also be a minus, one of those strange things about garlic is that several hours later it can creep out of your pores. Well, don't take that too far, but think but think of the law of God in that way. Meditate on it so that a few hours later it is breaking out of your pores.

Did you ever think of Jesus when He was being tempted in the wilderness what He did? He took three passages of Scripture, cited them from Deuteronomy 6 and Deuteronomy 8, "Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God," was one of them. He cited them from memory as though it's saying to us that one of the things that Jesus did was read and meditate on the Scriptures. You might say that because Jesus was God He knew all of the Bible, well that's a misunderstanding of how to understand the nature of the person of Christ. He was a fully integrated man. One of the things that Jesus did was to learn, and study, and pour over the Scripture so that in the hour of need it poured out of Him.

Ah, but I don't have enough time to do that, you say. Maybe what this verse is saying to you is that you need to read some Scripture in the morning so that you can meditate on it as you go about your work, so that you can meditate on it as you drive your vehicle to work. You know, I don't know how much time Joshua had. He was a captain of thousands of soldiers. They weren't really soldiers. They were totally untrained, They were unfit for warfare. They never had a day's experience of warfare. Yet God is saying to Joshua, if you're going to make one solid step in advancing the kingdom of God you need to meditate. You need to meditate on My words. Not only that, but you need to obey it.

Look at verse 7 again, "be strong and be careful to do according to all the law which Moses My servant commanded you," be careful. That's one of the things that we moderns are not very good at, being careful about the word of God. I can hear this comment. If you make too much of the law, if you make too much of Scripture it become excessive, it becomes legalism. Strange, isn't it, that when you are playing golf, and the ball lands in the rough, and if somebody goes and just picks up that ball and places it right in the middle of a fairway where he has a perfect sight to the green, you don't say, "There is no need to be careful about the rules of golf. You know, we're free now." No you're saying, "He's cheating."

If you're going to be a man of God, if you're going to be a woman of God, be careful to do everything that God asks you to do. That's the way you will grow and that's the way you will become strong. Meditate on God's word and keep God's word.

#### **IV. God promises His presence.**

There is a fourth thing in this passage. The fourth thing, if the first thing has to do with God's purpose, and the second has to do with God's promise, and the third with God's precept, fourth has to do with God's presence. He says it in verse 5 and again in verse 9, "Just as I have been with Moses, I will be with you." It's like a *lite motif*, or in Wagner's *Ring Cycle*, it's like that horn call that signals that Sigfried has come onto the stage or is about to leave the stage. It's something like a signature tune, that every time that God comes and addresses one of His servants He says, "Look I'm going to be with you." Can I put it in the modern 'touchy feely' sort of way, "I will be there for you." David, we recited this morning in our morning service from the 23 Psalm, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil because Thou art with me." Now matter how dark, no matter how difficult, no matter how trying the circumstances may be. No matter what obstacle, no matter how great the giants are, no matter how fierce the opposition, no matter how you may feel, no matter what state your mood may be in . Whether you're a morning person or an evening person. Whether you're choleric or whether your sanguine or whatever. "I will be with you." I will be with you wherever you go. When Paul was faced with the difficulty of evangelizing Corinth and he was frightened to go on, this was God's word to

him, I will be with you. It's what Jesus said to the church. "Go into all the world and I will be with you." It's what one of our friends called, the 'Emmanuel Principle,' God with His people. That's what Jesus means, God amongst His people.

I wonder what you're facing. I wonder what obstacles, what difficulties. It's a principle we are lifting out of this passage. This is a specific promise to Joshua as the captain of the people of God as they are about to enter the land of Canaan, and conquer it for Christ, and occupy it. You know, it is a principle that is found throughout the holy Scripture. You may be in this service tonight as a child of God, you're trusting in Jesus, but your life is a mess. Jesus says to you, "I will never leave you and I will never forsake you." You may be going through the ravages of a divorce and Jesus is saying to you, "Child of God I will never leave you and I will never forsake you." Some calamity may have befallen you and it looks as though the sky has fallen in and the bottom of the world is fallen out and Jesus is saying to you, can you hear the echo and reverberation of His sovereign voice, "I will never leave you. I will never forsake you."

It's hard to imagine greater encouragement for Joshua as they are about to embark on this great quest. Moses is dead, but the purpose of God is not. Moses is dead, but the promise of God is not. Moses is dead, but the precepts of God that can make you wise are not. Moses is dead, but the presence of God goes with His people forever. Now, there is a word to take you through this week and give you strength and give you encouragement and give you fortitude and God so enable it for His namesake. Let's pray together

Our Father in Heaven , we thank You for the richness of Your word. We thank you that it is a word that is alive and a word that is able to make us wise and to salvation, a word that can make us strong. Bless it to us, for Jesus sake. Amen.

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