

An Outline of Joshua **Joshua the new leader, ch:1-6**

*[Please note : sections in blue type are not broadcast on every radio station.
English Standard Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]*

Introduction

Today's talk is the first in our series 'An Outline of Joshua' and takes in the first six chapters of the book. These chapters record a series of remarkable events, marking the end of one era and the beginning of another.

Let's first set this book, the sixth book in the Bible, in its context. The five books before it, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, are sometimes collectively called the Books of the Law. They do indeed contain God's Law, embodied in the Ten Commandments, which set out man's responsibility towards God and towards his fellow man. They also contain a multitude of more detailed and specific laws, both moral, that is, relating to human behaviour and relationships, and also what we call ceremonial, setting out the details of how the people of Israel were to approach God in worship.

But these five books also contain much that is history. They record the Creation and the earliest history of the world, before becoming the specific history of Israel, the nation descended, by divine promise, from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. And beginning in the second book, Exodus, they tell the story of an epic Journey. This is the account of how God brought the nation of Israel from slavery in Egypt, where we find them at the beginning of Exodus, across the desert, under the leadership of His servant Moses, to where we find them in the closing chapters of Deuteronomy. And where we then find them is standing, as it were, on the eastern bank of the Jordan river, looking across it into the land that God has promised them.

The six chapters we are looking at today cover, in the space of just a few days, the appointment of Joshua as the God-given successor to Moses, the miraculous crossing of the Jordan, the final step, we might say, of that great Journey from Egypt, and several other events of great symbolic significance as that Journey comes to an end and the new era, that of taking possession of the promised land, gets under way.

Joshua commissioned

As we go through this talk, I'm going to be reading from each of the six chapters. For now, we'll read chapter 1, verses 1 to 9. I'm reading from the English Standard Version.

"After the death of Moses the servant of the LORD, the LORD said to Joshua the son of Nun, Moses' assistant, 'Moses my servant is dead. Now therefore arise, go over this Jordan, you and all this people, into the land that I am giving to them, to the people of Israel. Every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon I have given to you, just as I promised to Moses. From the wilderness and this Lebanon as far as the great river, the river Euphrates, all the land of the Hittites to the Great

Sea towards the going down of the sun shall be your territory. No man shall be able to stand before you all the days of your life. Just as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will not leave you or forsake you. Be strong and courageous, for you shall cause this people to inherit the land that I swore to their fathers to give them. Only be strong and very courageous, being careful to do according to all the law that Moses my servant commanded you. Do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, that you may have good success wherever you go. This Book of the 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 good success. Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go.”

These opening verses set the tone for the rest of the book. The Book of Joshua, and indeed the entire history of the nation of Israel, form an object lesson in two things. On the one hand, we see the steadfast faithfulness of God. He ever has the best interests of His people at heart. He always honours His promises, and always bears patiently with their unfaithfulness. As Psalm 136 says, 26 times over,

“His steadfast love endures for ever”.

On the other hand, we see the fickleness and unbelief of man, never trusting God for very long, and often acting in outright disobedience and open defiance of His wishes. In fact, the chapters we are considering today form one of the brief interludes when the people follow God’s instructions, and consequently all goes well. Against the background of the rest of Old Testament history, the first six chapters of Joshua are about as good as it gets.

In the passage we’ve read, notice how far-reaching is the promise God makes about the territorial limits of the land He is giving to His people. “As far as the great river Euphrates” says verse 4. But as we go through the book, we will find that the momentum which built up at the beginning falters later on, and the ultimate borders within which Israel settled fell far short of what God had in view for them.

God also promised to be with them wherever they went. He would never leave them nor forsake them. Yet there was an expectation that Joshua and the people would play their part as well. Joshua was exhorted, in verses 6, 7 and 9, to be strong and very courageous, and not to deviate at all from keeping all the Law which had been given them through Moses. The Book of the Law was to be constantly before them, and if they took care to observe all of it, then their way would prosper and they would have good success.

Rahab hides the spies

Chapter 2 records the adventures of two men whom Joshua sent over the river to spy out the land in advance of the crossing. They came to Jericho, the city just across the river from their encampment, and into the house of a prostitute named Rahab. The king of Jericho got wind of this and tried to arrest them, but Rahab pretended they had already left the city. In fact she had hidden them on the roof of her house, which was built into the city wall.

Let’s now read from chapter 2 verses 8 to 14, which report a conversation between Rahab and the men.

“Before the men lay down, she came up to them on the roof and said to the men, ‘I know that the LORD has given you the land, and that the fear

of you has fallen upon us, and that all the inhabitants of the land melt away before you. For we have heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites who were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon and Og, whom you devoted to destruction. And as soon as we heard it, our hearts melted, and there was no spirit left in any man because of you, for the LORD your God, he is God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath. Now then, please swear to me by the LORD that, as I have dealt kindly with you, you also will deal kindly with my father's house, and give me a sure sign that you will save alive my father and mother, my brothers and sisters, and all who belong to them, and deliver our lives from death.' And the men said to her, 'Our life for yours even to death! If you do not tell this business of ours, then when the LORD gives us the land we will deal kindly and faithfully with you.'"

The story of Rahab is a shining example of the grace of God. In the passage we've just read, she refers to the two kings of the Amorites, whom Israel had "devoted to destruction." To "devote to destruction" is an expression used several times¹ in this part of the Old Testament. It means the complete obliteration of a people and all of their possessions, and was what God had commanded, in His instructions to Moses, for the then inhabitants of the land². To modern ears this sounds shockingly harsh, but we need to face up to the solemn reality of how unutterably horrible sin really is, and to understand that God was acting in judgement because of the lives the inhabitants of the land were living. The judgement of God is in reality what we all deserve, since every one of us has sinned³, and from which we may escape only by casting ourselves on the mercy of God and availing ourselves of the salvation He offers us through His Son Jesus Christ, Who died on the cross to be our substitute⁴.

Rahab acknowledged the one true God as ruling over both the heavens and the earth, and did indeed cast herself on His mercy. Despite being included, as a citizen of Jericho, amongst those decreed for destruction, and despite the shame attaching to her occupation, she is a trophy of the grace of God, and she and her family were indeed saved from harm when Jericho was overthrown⁵.

The favour God showed to Rahab is even greater still, for she had the honour of being integrated into the tribe of Judah, becoming the great great grandmother of King David, and thereby being included in the ancestral line of the Lord Jesus⁶.

The crossing of the Jordan

Chapters 3 and 4 give the account of how the people crossed the Jordan River. Despite their habitual unbelief, questioning and doubting God throughout their journey, God protected them and provided for them all the way, a lesson for us, we who travel through this world as Christian pilgrims today. And just as He had suspended the laws of nature at the beginning of the journey, holding back the waters of the Red Sea, so here in Joshua chapter 3, God holds back the waters of the Jordan so that His people can cross on dry land. Verse 24 of chapter 4 tells us God's purpose in this:

"... So that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the LORD is mighty, that you may fear the LORD your God for ever."

But we'll now read the detailed account from verses 14 to 17 of chapter 3:

"So when the people set out from their tents to pass over the Jordan with the priests bearing the ark of the covenant before the people, and as soon as those bearing the ark had come as far as the Jordan, and

the feet of the priests bearing the ark were dipped in the brink of the water (now the Jordan overflows all its banks throughout the time of harvest), the waters coming down from above stood and rose up in a heap very far away, at Adam, the city that is beside Zarethan, and those flowing down towards the Sea of the Arabah, the Salt Sea, were completely cut off. And the people passed over opposite Jericho. Now the priests bearing the ark of the covenant of the LORD stood firmly on dry ground in the midst of the Jordan, and all Israel was passing over on dry ground until all the nation finished passing over the Jordan.”

Not only did God protect the people, and provide for them, but He journeyed amongst them as well. The ark of the covenant symbolised the very presence of God with the people, as the following verses, 35 and 36, of Numbers chapter 10, show:

“And whenever the ark set out, Moses said, ‘Arise, O LORD, and let your enemies be scattered, and let those who hate you flee before you.’ And when it rested, he said, ‘Return, O LORD, to the ten thousand thousands of Israel.’”

It was as soon as the feet of the priests carrying the ark were dipped in the brink of the water that the flow of water stopped. Later on, in Joshua chapter 4 verse 18, when all the people had crossed over, we read that as soon as the priests stepped out of the river bed, the waters returned to their normal function.

The symbolism of this seems clear. We can pass through deep waters if we pass through them with God! Many believers treasure the thought of the crossing of the desert as a picture of the Christian life, bringing us at last to the Jordan, and the crossing of the Jordan as a picture of passing through death and being ushered into the Lord’s presence (the promised land). This picture is less than perfect, because the promised land was not, as Heaven will be, “a Sabbath rest for the people of God.”⁷ The land was filled with determined enemies who had first to be defeated before the rest could be enjoyed.

Nevertheless, both the crossing of the Red Sea and that of the Jordan undoubtedly speak to us of the death of Christ, and first Corinthians 10 verse 2 specifically connects the earlier crossing, that of the Red Sea⁸, with baptism, which is the believer symbolically going into death with Christ and being raised with Him⁹.

Symbolic stones

The next significant event we will look at is perhaps not exactly symbolism. It is a question of remembrance.

Let’s read the first seven verses of chapter 4:

“When all the nation had finished passing over the Jordan, the LORD said to Joshua, ‘Take twelve men from the people, from each tribe a man, and command them, saying, “Take twelve stones from here out of the midst of the Jordan, from the very place where the priests’ feet stood firmly, and bring them over with you and lay them down in the place where you lodge tonight.”’ Then Joshua called the twelve men from the people of Israel, whom he had appointed, a man from each tribe. And Joshua said to them, ‘Pass on before the ark of the LORD your God into the midst of the Jordan, and take up each of you a stone upon his shoulder, according to the number of the tribes of the people of Israel, that this may be a sign among you. When your children ask in

time to come, “What do those stones mean to you?” then you shall tell them that the waters of the Jordan were cut off before the ark of the covenant of the LORD. When it passed over the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. So these stones shall be to the people of Israel a memorial for ever.”

How evocative this simple memorial, made out of 12 ordinary stones, must have been to future generations! There would come many a future day when the nation had strayed far from God, and were suffering the consequences in His hand of discipline being laid upon them, oppressed and enslaved by invading armies from the nations around. Perhaps at those times this memorial would speak to them of all that God had done for them.

So it may be with us. The blessings Israel knew as they became established in the land, are far outshone by what Paul calls “the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness towards us in Christ Jesus”¹⁰, which we have received as Christian believers. Yet we are just as capable as they of slipping away, losing sight of our heavenly calling and becoming preoccupied with the affairs of this transient world. In such situations God appeals to us to remember, as he did to the church in ancient Ephesus, in Revelation chapter 2 verse 5:

“Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first.”

Three significant events

Chapter 5 narrates three more significant events. These are the restoration of the practice of circumcision, the celebration of the Passover, and the end of the manna.

At the very dawn of the nation’s history, God had instructed Abraham that all of his male descendants were to be circumcised when they were 8 days old¹¹. This was a token of the covenant between God and His people and had been practised consistently from then onwards.

But, for some reason, the nation had allowed the practice to lapse during the desert journey, as verses 4 and 5 of Joshua chapter 5 show:

“And this is the reason why Joshua circumcised them: all the males of the people who came out of Egypt, all the men of war, had died in the wilderness on the way after they had come out of Egypt. Though all the people who came out had been circumcised, yet all the people who were born on the way in the wilderness after they had come out of Egypt had not been circumcised.”

And so God instructed Joshua to put this to rights. Joshua obeyed, and all the males then underwent this painful procedure. The meaning of this important symbolic act is described in verse 9 as the “rolling away of the reproach of Egypt” and the place was known thereafter as Gilgal, which is similar to the Hebrew word meaning “to roll.”

In the New Testament, this physical rite, the literal cutting off of flesh, is replaced by a vital spiritual principle, and we are taught that as Christians we are to live our lives “according to the Spirit” rather than “according to the flesh.”¹² Also, it is linked with baptism, as Colossians 2 verses 11 and 12 state:

“In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised

with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.”

Continuing from Joshua chapter 5 verses 10 to 12, we read:

“While the people of Israel were encamped at Gilgal, they kept the Passover on the fourteenth day of the month in the evening on the plains of Jericho. And the day after the Passover, on that very day, they ate of the produce of the land, unleavened cakes and parched grain. And the manna ceased the day after they ate of the produce of the land. And there was no longer manna for the people of Israel, but they ate of the fruit of the land of Canaan that year.”

It seems to me significant that the scripture specifically says that it was while they were encamped at Gilgal that they kept the Passover. The Passover commemorates the nation’s last night in Egypt¹³. Whilst God’s angel was passing through Egypt on a mission of judgment, striking down all the firstborn in the land, the people of Israel were safe in their houses, because in each household, the Passover lamb had been killed and its blood daubed upon the lintel and door-posts. This is a beautiful picture, or “type”, of how Christians today are sheltered from God’s judgement by the blood of Jesus¹⁴.

At Gilgal then, where the reproach of Egypt was rolled away, the people remembered that God had purchased them out of it, and was about to conduct them into the land where they truly belonged.

Finally, the manna, the mysterious substance which God had provided for them to eat throughout their desert journey¹⁵, had fulfilled its purpose and was no longer supplied, because the produce of the land was now available.

At the end of chapter 5, Joshua is by Jericho, and he encounters a man with a drawn sword, who identifies himself as “the commander of the army of the LORD.” We are not told why he is there, but we may suppose that this divine messenger is there to strengthen and encourage Joshua ahead of the assault on the city.

It is noteworthy that Joshua worships this mysterious person, who does not rebuke him for doing so. This can only mean that he is more than merely a divine messenger. This is God Himself appearing in human form.

Jericho conquered

Chapter 6 tells the story of the fall of Jericho. Let’s read verses two to five.

“And the LORD said to Joshua, ‘See, I have given Jericho into your hand, with its king and mighty men of valour. You shall march round the city, all the men of war going round the city once. Thus shall you do for six days. Seven priests shall bear seven trumpets of rams’ horns before the ark. On the seventh day you shall march round the city seven times, and the priests shall blow the trumpets. And when they make a long blast with the ram’s horn, when you hear the sound of the trumpet, then all the people shall shout with a great shout, and the wall of the city will fall down flat, and the people shall go up, everyone straight before him.’”

What unconventional military tactics! The rest of the chapter records how Joshua carried out, to the letter, the instructions the Lord had given him in the verses we have read, and how, exactly as

God had promised, the city wall fell flat, although not every part of it, clearly, since then Rahab's family would not have escaped.

I can only marvel at the unquestioning faith shown by Joshua and the people. They took God at His word, and God kept His word. And so at the end of chapter 6 we leave the nation safely over the Jordan, the first great enemy city conquered, and Joshua established as the divinely appointed leader, under whom the conquest of the land will now proceed.

Thank you for listening to this Truth for Today talk on Joshua chapters 1 to 6, in our series 'An Outline of Joshua' - talk number T1393. Scriptures were quoted from the English Standard Version.

¹Deuteronomy 2:34; 3:6; Joshua 10:1 ²Deuteronomy 7:2 ³Romans 3:23 ⁴1 Peter 3:18 ⁵Joshua 6:22-23 ⁶Matthew 1:5 ⁷Hebrews 4:9 ⁸1 Corinthians 10:2 ⁹Romans 6:3-5 ¹⁰Ephesians 2:7 ¹¹Genesis 17:9-14 ¹²Romans 8:4-6 ¹³Exodus 12:1-20 ¹⁴1 Corinthians 5:7-8 ¹⁵Exodus 16:4-21

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