

The Book of Joshua

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Few can have forgotten their encounters with the book of Joshua. Perhaps years ago, the derring-do of Joshua, the great military leader, will have entranced the young Sunday School pupil as the account of the utter ruin of the walls of Jericho was recounted and choruses sung and enacted, celebrating the victory. At other times the comfort of the words, 'Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged' will have become a very personal message in the midst of trouble and difficulty. Then there may well have been an occasion when 'as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD' has been a real challenge. And time would fail to tell of encounters with the stories about Rahab and the spies, the examples of Caleb and Joshua (and even the daughters of Zelophehad), of Ai and Achan, of the sun standing still, of giants . . . Here is the stuff of great sermons and exciting Bible studies!

However, there are dark corners in this book too and lists of unpronounceable names and localities, detailed instructions to ancient people that seem to have little relevance today. Nevertheless, even this is part of the inspired Scripture of which Paul could say 'it is profitable'. Thus the following studies are designed to follow familiar paths as well as explore 'spiritually' dust-filled and cobweb strewn cupboards. And it is hoped that, as a result, the old will become fresh and shimmer once again with excitement and that the new and neglected will reveal unexpected and priceless treasures.

1:1-9 Stepping out of the Shadow

Poor Joshua! The contented 'No. 2', he suddenly finds himself thrust into the limelight. Moreover, this was at an age when most have retired and are looking for a quiet life. Further, it was at a crisis point in the life of the people he was called to lead. Finally, it was to follow in the footsteps of one of the greatest men who ever lived!

Something of the anxiety and dark foreboding he must have felt (and with which we can probably identify) echoes throughout these early verses. He is referred to as 'Moses' assistant' (1), Moses being mentioned six times in nine verses! Then, the latter is given one of the greatest accolades in the Bible: 'the servant of the Lord' (1); similar phrases occurring later (2,7). How aware Joshua must have been of stepping into shoes that seemed all too great for him!

Further, there is the task with which he is confronted. To 'cross the Jordan' (2) might seem a big enough challenge! But he is then to conquer a vast territory 'from the desert and from Lebanon to the great river, the Euphrates – all the Hittite country – and to the Great Sea on the west' (4). Joshua would have known, what the story subsequently reveals, that this included the homes of giants and one of the largest cities in the ancient world. He would have been fully aware of the crack troops and sophisticated weapons that his enemies would possess. He must have known the technical mastery that the Canaanites had developed to defend their cities . . . He knew he was fighting with an ill-equipped, inexperienced 'rabble' who had been wandering as nomads in a desert for forty years: not the best training for the task . . . At his age, we can understand him stretching out for his pension book! But though the task seemed impossible and his own resources inadequate to the task the word of command comes, 'Now then . . . get ready . . . cross' (2).

Most of us already know the sequel. As the book closes we are told, 'Then Joshua sent the people away, each to his own inheritance' (24:28). But this is some forty years away!

However, it is at this point that we are introduced to Joshua's God and the following story is really about him. He is the one who is 'about to give' the territory to the Israelites (2) and who will be with Joshua 'wherever you go' (9). And he already has a track record: 'As I was with Moses' (5)! Tumbling through Joshua's mind must have been a kaleidoscope of images. He would recall the oppression of his youth and the heavy tasks he had been called upon to undertake. But he would also have remembered with awe the plagues that God wrought through Moses and that brought the superpower of Egypt to its knees. For an old man the dividing of the Red Sea and the destruction of Pharaoh's home guard would have been as vivid as if it had happened yesterday! Then there was the LORD's miraculous provision for his vast people in a barren environment for forty years! At the same time there was some unfinished business between the LORD and Moses. Dead the latter might be, but God had made some promises to him: the possession of 'every place where you set your foot' (3). All this must have been reassuring.

Nevertheless, Joshua was clearly a timid man. Past history and solemn promises were all right but he still shook in his sandals in the face of the present challenge! There was the understandable danger that he would 'freeze' with fright or plum the depths of depression faced with a challenge simply too big to contemplate. Thus, the LORD comes to him with words of challenge ('be strong and very courageous' 6.7), encouragement ('do not be terrified, do not be discouraged' (9), and reassurance ('I will never leave you nor forsake you', 5, 'the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go', 9). Thus, to the guarantee of God's promises is

added the certainty of his presence.

There is, however, a condition. Fundamental to the fulfillment of God's promises is a life-long commitment to 'be careful to obey all the law' (7). This is to be accomplished by a whole-hearted, moment-by-moment saturation in its teachings and willing obedience to its demands: 'Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate upon it day and night . . . be careful to do everything written in it' (8).

The following chapters 'check this out'. Will Joshua find that in what Eugene Peterson calls his 'long obedience in the same direction' God will honour his promises? Above all, will God prove to be the sort of God we, too, can love, trust and obey? In the face of our frailty and the giants, citadels and other enemies that surround us, can we hope to experience his faithfulness to all that he promises us and know the blessing of his presence? Read on!

1:10-18 Whose Agenda?

At first sight this little section appears to offer little but a rather uninteresting filling to the sandwich that contains Joshua's call and the dramatic account of the spies visit to Jericho. But fillings can be deceptive: a bland appearance betraying a mouth-watering taste. So it also is with the Bible . . . not least the book of Joshua . . . and here!

Thus Joshua rises well to the first challenge. The Jordan, we will soon discover, was in flood; a muddy, tree-strewn, torrent of substantial width faced by a people without swimming skills or means to cross!

Nevertheless, Joshua knew his God . . . and his Bible: a fact demonstrated by the manner in which this section is saturated with the book of Deuteronomy.¹ Thus, Joshua did not call a council of war but 'ordered' the civil and military leaders of the people to prepare for action (10). He did this, not on the basis of any personal claim to authority, but the authority of God's promise: 'the LORD your God is giving you [the land] for your own' (11). Indeed, while the people needed to act (as Joshua had done so promptly) the emphasis is placed upon the one who would accomplish his purposes through them. In this way, 'The people will take possession. Yes, but only of what the Lord their God gives them.'² Thus, Joshua 'is the military commander par excellence in Israel by the very fact that he carries out the command of the heavenly general'.³

At this point we are introduced to a group of people who keep 'popping up' through the book of Joshua: 'the Reubenites, Gadites and the half tribe of Manasseh' (12). These were people who, on the authority of no less than Moses, had been allocated territory east of the Jordan river.⁴ Their territory had already been won and sufficiently secured for 'your wives, your children and your livestock [to] . . . stay in the land' (14). Thus, these two and a half tribes had every human reason to 'down tools' and head off home.

But human reason must bow before the LORD's command! Thus Joshua required them to join the other tribes in the conquest of the west bank (15). Pink puts it this way, Joshua 'did not beg for compliance as a favour to himself – I hope you will be willing to serve under me. Nor did he appeal on behalf of his brethren – the other tribes will be encouraged if you are willing to help them. Nor did he bid them remem-

ber their promise to Moses. No, he pressed upon them the Word of God.'⁵

And the two and a half tribes 'came up trumps': they pledge absolute fidelity to Joshua (16).⁶ However, this is not blind obedience. Joshua is obeyed, as Moses before him, precisely because he is walking in the pathway of the LORD's commands (17,18). Their final words are touching: 'Only be strong and courageous' (18). Perhaps they recognized what the LORD did: Joshua's own sense of unworthiness. They certainly offered pastoral concern to 'fire his enthusiasm'.

Thus they are presented to us as models. They set aside personal agendas: the fact that their own goals had been met and the natural desire to avoid the dangers ahead and stay at home with their families. They were committed to follow the word of God and faithful God-obeying leadership. They were ready to recognize and support their leader in his vulnerability. They become the first to follow Joshua's own example.

2:1-24 A Preaching Prostitute

For all the familiarity of this story, there is much that is rather peculiar about it. Why, for example, include a story about a prostitute in the middle of a narrative in which 1:18 seems to naturally lead to 3:1? And what is the story intended to teach?

This is where Old Testament narrative requires something of the skills of a detective. Such stories are often allusive and we need to hunt out the clues to unlock the meaning. Several seem to exist here. First of all, the story suddenly become ponderously slow. When this occurs in Hebrew stories it appears to have been a way of expressing emphasis. The author, therefore, clearly regarded the story as important to what he was trying to share. Secondly, the chapter shows all the marks of very carefully planning. Davis highlights this in the following chart:⁸

1a	Joshua's Commission
2-7	Arrival/Concern: Protection of the Spies
8-14	Confession of Faith
15-21	Escape/Concern: Protection of Rahab and Co
22-24	Return to Joshua.

This sort of structure is known 'in the trade' as a chiasm and it tends to throw the emphasis upon the central section. Indeed, Davis also notes that suspense is created at the end of verse 7 and this is unrelieved until verse 15. He says it is as if the reader is being told, 'Don't bother your head about how those two fellows will escape; there is something far more important I want to tell you.'

Thirdly, as with many stories, the climax of a Hebrew tale often comes right at the end. That appears to be the case here as the spies report, 'The LORD has surely given the whole land into our hands' (24).

Finally, Old Testament stories are full of humour. This is not normally the belly-splitting stuff but gentle, dry irony. Could that be true here? Joshua has been called to live by faith in the land. Here 'sinful' and 'pagan' Rahab shows what is required before ever Joshua is seriously put to the test! Thus she becomes a model and challenge to him!

With all this in mind, we can read the story more intelligently. We might gag at 'good Christian boys' visiting a brothel.¹⁰ But ethical niceties sometimes need to be set aside

in the context of war and the author shows little interest in the sort of questions that may preoccupy us and lead us to miss the point of his story. Indeed, the choice of a sleazy 'down-town joint' where the proprietor was often ready to offer additional favours was wise. Men, not least strangers missing 'home comforts', would have often trodden a path to her door without comment. It made a good hiding place. Further such, made Rahab's 'yes the men came . . . but they left' (4) plausible. A brothel is characterized by its quick turn-over!

Yet, although they would probably have spoken a dialect familiar to cosmopolitan Jericho, the city was (as will become still more apparent) on high alert. The spy network quickly picked up their presence and reported it to the king who took immediate action. (2,3). Here we might expect the chapter to end, but . . .

We are surprised by Rahab's response. She had 'taken the two men and hidden them' (4, see also the repeated emphasis in verse 6) and then sent the king's men off on a wild goose chase . . . Or should we be surprised? It is often said there is honour among thieves and perhaps Rahab could further her reputation as a safe haven for other visitors. Was she angling for future business?¹¹

The sequel shows that the answer is yes and no! Now, in the central section of the chapter (8-15) the reason for Rahab's rather peculiar behaviour is revealed. At nightfall, the two astonished spies are doubtless thunderstruck as Rahab shares not her body but her faith with them. It is possible that her affirmation, 'the LORD your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below' (11) still betrays a failure to have reached a full monotheistic faith. In the circumstances her inability to dot her i's and cross her t's is understandable. The spies, however, were less interested to check whether her theology matched precisely with theirs! More staggering was her, 'I know that the LORD has given this land to you' (9). Rahab uses the past tense: as far as she is concerned the occupation has already taken place. And she knows it 'deep down in her gut'. The verb used here implies a deep and strong conviction.

What follows demonstrates the humour of the writer. For forty years the Israelites have been wandering around the wilderness in a faithless state. In the meanwhile the significance of events forty years earlier ('we have heard how the LORD dried up the Red Sea . . .', 10) and more recent news ('what you did to Sihon and Og') has not been lost on the Canaanites. In fact while Israel had been frightened of the Canaanites, the latter's 'hearts sank and everyone's courage failed' (11). Jericho, at the height of its powers, was demoralised and ripe for taking. Thus a pagan prostitute proved the mouthpiece of God and reassured the spies that 'their God was big enough for the job'.

We should not fail to admire Rahab. Schaeffer says, she was surrounded by a 'hostile and awesome environment . . . she was still surrounded by a monolithic mentality, and entire world-view. She was pressured by a powerful city and an ancient culture . . . At the moment she could see nothing with her eyes which indicated it would fall . . . [Nevertheless] Rahab knew! And what she knew was totally against her culture. She believed in a new God, a God totally and diametrically opposed to the gods of Jericho . . . she stood for the unseen against the seen, standing in acute danger

until Jericho fell.'¹²

All this, naturally, led her to seek the mercy of the LORD (12,13). Here is faith in action: she doesn't sign the spies' decision cards but casts herself upon the mercy of their God.¹³ Small wonder she is commended in the list of heroes and heroines of faith in Hebrews 11:31!

The spies' flight is described in a very matter-of-fact way: it is presented as scarcely more than necessary background information (15,16,22). What is far more important is that (while apparently hanging on the rope!) the spies affirm that should Rahab meet the conditions her family will be embraced within the 'family' of Israel and treated just as they would be (17-21). Hence we are given a gentle reminder that Old Testament religion was not so much racial as religious. As with Ruth, Rahab had 'come to take refuge' (Ruth 2:12) under the LORD's wings and was reckoned as a true Israelite.¹⁴

And then the climax of the chapter (24)! The spies return and report Rahab's words in the form usually adopted for a prophetic oracle! Thus encouraged, Joshua is surely ready for action.¹⁵

3:1-17 Life on the Threshold

What a story! Hundreds of years, generations of longing, many years in slavery and living as nomads in the desert: but now . . . Israel is on the threshold of the land of promise. Having moved from Shittim (eight miles from the Jordan), and following an early start, the people are camped on its banks.¹⁶ The promised land is merely a mile away, its mountains and oases in full view (1,2). God is faithful.

But 'three days' wait (2) must have seemed a long time: enough to impress on the people the hopelessness of their situation!¹⁷ During the 'harvest' (15) the Jordan changes character. At other times of the year it is a narrow, easily fordable channel, only a 100 metres wide. However, in the autumn the wider channel, clogged with bushes, can be filled up to 15 metres in depth. Moreover, the steep descent from Galilee to the Dead Sea makes it a raging torrent, impassible to the most intrepid.

At which point we are introduced to the 'ark of the covenant' (3). Up till now the ark has taken something of a back seat. Israel has been led by the cloud and fire. But just as the manna seems to have ceased, so the cloud now appears to have withdrawn. From now on, and for centuries, the ark will be the symbol of God's presence in the midst of his people, kept by its custodians, 'the priests, who are Levites'.

In the meanwhile, it appears that the LORD had already revealed his plans to Joshua (3,4) and the people are stationed 'about a thousand yards' away (4); apparently to get a grandstand view of what is about to happen.

One final act of preparation is required: 'consecrate yourselves' (5). The precise reason for this is unclear. Some suggest that it emphasizes that co-operation and obedience to God's will are necessary to enjoy God's victory. This is, of course, true (as chapter 7 will shortly demonstrate). However, perhaps the focus is rather different here. Thus, Davis comments that 'it is crucial that Israel recognise that what happens is indeed Yahweh's work; and unless they have the

proper insight, expectancy and preparation, they could see Yahweh's work and yet not understand the true value and significance . . . God's people must be rightly prepared for God's "show" if they are going to appreciate it, if they are going to be fortified in faith.¹⁸

I love the way the author of Joshua tells his story! Just when we are on tip-toe waiting to witness the 'amazing things' (5) of which Joshua has spoken, we are tantalised by having to plough through nine verses of final instructions! However, this both heightens our sense of expectancy and throws the contents of these verses into focus. Indeed, as the story unfolds, we are further tantalised by the command to take the ark and 'go and stand in the river' (8). Why? We must wait to find out. Meanwhile we might be frustrated by this, but the author has something important to share. What, then might this be?

First of all, the ark and the importance of the faithful service of those with responsibility for it is emphasized (6,8, see also 15). What will take place is the LORD's work. Secondly, what follows would offer the people the credentials to follow Joshua confidently in the future (7). Effective work demands confidence in the leadership. Thirdly, the people are assured that the promises that the LORD has made in the past are about to become reality: they are on the extreme edge of history in God's making (9-11). Fourthly, Joshua's 'certainly' (10) and the mute obedience of the priests demonstrate confidence in God's word and that the lessons of the past have been learned. Here they appear as exemplary leaders for the people following them.

And then, a further stalling tactic! Twelve men are set apart for an unspecified task before . . . an incredible miracle is predicted, to the second, in advance: 'as soon as the priests who carry the ark of the LORD – the LORD of all the earth – set foot in the Jordan, the water flowing downstream will be cut off and stand up in a heap' (14).

The miracle is, however, described in a very matter-of-fact way. There is something rather anti-climactic in the simple chronicle that follows (14-17). But then what did we expect of the 'Lord of all the earth'? Surely nothing less than absolute fidelity to his word!

Of course, the previous generation had been consecrated, miraculously brought through the waters of the Red Sea. But, faithless, they had died in the wilderness. How will the next generation fare? Read on!

4:1-24 Oh No! Two Church Meetings!

I abominate meetings! I like to get on with the action. So what, on earth, is Joshua doing calling two 'church meetings' (1-18, 19-24)?¹⁹ Yet we need to pause, as Israel did. We are beginning to learn that the author of this book tells the story his way: but always to a point. So why these two stories?

First of all we are reminded of the obscure reference in 3:12 to the appointment of twelve men. Here they are given a 'job description': to 'take up twelve stones from the middle of the Jordan . . . and put them down at the place where you stay tonight' (3).

To what purpose? Joshua spells it out (4-7). Simply it is that 'getting through the river isn't the end of it all; you must

remember what happened there.'²⁰ To help the 'little grey cells' Joshua resorts to a favoured strategy. Throughout the book memorials are set up as visible reminders and places of pilgrimage so that neither those who experienced what happened there, nor those that followed, could forget their history. This was important. What took place that day embraced all the Israelites (hence 'twelve men . . . from each tribe', 4), both present and future ('In the future, when your children ask you', 6). It was a living 'memorial' (7), an *aide memoire*, of the mighty redemptive acts of the LORD of the covenant. After all, it is our memories that so often let us down in the life of faith. Of course, the LORD is not in the habit of doing these things: that is why what is stressed here is the importance of faithfully recalling and witnessing to what he has already done.

Preachers are often encouraged to make the same point in a number of different ways for the sake of emphasis. Yes! I too have suffered where it is overdone . . . and yet repetition does help us avoid missing an important point. The fact that verses 8-18 are a bit repetitive should, therefore, encourage us to listen; something critical is being communicated. Time and again, these verses emphasize obedience: 'so the Israelites did as Joshua commanded them' (8), the priests and people did 'everything the LORD had commanded Joshua' (10, see also the example in 15-18). Above all, 'The LORD said to Joshua' and so 'Joshua commanded the priests' (15,16). Here then is community where from the senior leader, through the other leaders and to the people, fidelity to God's words is the 'core value'.

But not all is repetition. We are given (again in a matter-of-fact way) further details of the crossing. All the emphasis here lies upon the fundamental inactivity of the people. The ark was centre stage (it is mentioned five times in eleven verses). It was the LORD who was at work. All the people did was that they 'hurried over' (10). You bet they did! What an exciting day: rushing through the river-bed to place their feet upon the promised land. Another day there will be work to do. Here the LORD, and he alone, is at work!

In the midst of all this God's promise to Joshua was fulfilled (14) and he was 'exalted . . . in the sight of all Israel' (compare 3:7). Interestingly, in the latter passage, Joshua was promised exaltation like that of Moses. However, Moses' leadership had been accompanied by a lot of 'aggro' down the years. Joshua seems to have largely escaped this, but then it is the LORD's way to exceed his promises!

'Church' Meeting No. 2 (and be warned! several more are coming up in chapter 5) is found in verses 19-24. Yet neither this meeting nor those that preceded or follow is what you would normally expect of a military commander before engaging in war!

The early verses are a bit of a puzzle. Which stones are these? Were there two memorials or one?²¹ In a study such as this one can leave the details to the scholars. Two points are, however, of interest. As 5:11-12 will emphasize, this was the season of the Passover. This meeting appears, therefore, to be preparatory to the events of chapter 5. The Passover had symbolized how an unholy people, covered by the blood of the lamb, might know God's friendship and see his mighty power. Forty years later a new generation, who had now experienced a repeat of the Red Sea and the fulfillment of the Exodus, needed to be reminded of some very

basic truths (20-23)! The stones were a start (and their importance repeatedly stressed), but there were other important lessons to learn before the people, within sight of the city of 'Jericho' and on its 'eastern border' (19) could deal with problem no. 1.

Secondly, God 'performs his acts before the forum of the peoples'.²² But he does this not merely to flabbergast his enemies but 'so that you might always fear the LORD your God' (24). Thus, remembering his works is a powerful incentive to faithfulness.

To Be Continued

Notes

- 1 Thus, for example, verse 11 echoes Dt. 3:18; 4:5, 14, verses 12,13 reflect Dt. 3:20 (as well as Num. 32) and verse 18 reflects Dt. 1:26, 43: 9:23.
- 2 A. G. Auld, *Joshua, Judges and Ruth* (Edinburgh: St. Andrew Press, 1984), 12.
- 3 Butler, 18.
- 4 See Numbers 32.
- 5 A. W. Pink, *Gleanings in Joshua* (Chicago: Moody, 1964), 21f.
- 6 Some note that in 4:13 40,000 fighting men are recorded as coming from these tribes. On the other hand Num. 26:7,18,34 mentions 110,000. Is this indicative of partial obedience in response to Joshua's 'all' (14)? In view of the fact that the two and a half tribes seem to consistently feature in a positive way throughout the book of Joshua, it seems preferable to conclude that Joshua called for the crack troops to follow him while leaving 'Dad's army' at home to secure the land.
- 7 C. J. Goslinga, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 40.
- 8 D. R. Davis, *Joshua: No Falling Words* (Fearn: Christian Focus, 2000), 25.
- 9 Davis, 25.

- 10 Various attempts by squeamish commentators to 're-invent' Rahab as an inn-keeper show a great deal more as to the imagination of the writer than their fidelity to the text!
- 11 We may be surprised that Rahab's property was not 'turned over' by the secret police. However, in the ancient world the privacy of a woman was usually respected. I recall the not dissimilar story told by a friend from the old Eastern Europe. He said that, when he was a baby, his parents used to smuggle Bibles in his carrycot since to disturb a baby was disapproved in his culture!
- 12 F. A. Schaeffer, *Joshua and the Flow of Biblical History* (London: Hodder & Stoughton), 69, 72f.
- 13 In doing so, she thinks like a typical inhabitant of the ancient world and seeks mercy for her family and clan. See, M. H. Woudstra, *The Book of Joshua* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 74.
- 14 Elsewhere this is emphasized in other ways. She is named in both David's and Jesus' genealogies and in 6:25 her marriage to Nashon (a prince in Israel, see Num. 7:12) is recorded.
- 15 Davis, 28, helpfully notes that God's 'word should be sufficient to bolster us. But because of the weakness of our faith, he graciously stoops down and by a plethora of signs, evidences, and providences makes us feel assured of his already sure word.'
- 16 So J. Garstang, *The Foundations of Biblical History. Joshua and Judges* (London: Constable, 1931), 135. He adds that eight miles was probably a typical march for a company like Israel; hence the early start.
- 17 Was this the divine purpose behind the delay?
- 18 Davis, 34. Yahweh is the Hebrew name for God, usually translated in our Bibles as LORD.
- 19 Surely the worst of all meetings!
- 20 Davis, 39.
- 21 By its translation the NIV assumes two but the Hebrew text is less clear.
- 22 Woudstra, 96.