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Be strong and courageous

Please read Joshua 1:1–9

One of the great preachers of Scottish Presbyterianism in the seventeenth century was John Livingstone (1603–72). When he was a young man in his twenties he doubted whether he had a call to the ministry; he had a great fear that God had not set him apart to that work. When he was twenty-seven years old he still had no ministerial charge. A neighbouring minister one day engaged him to preach on a Sunday at his church in Shotts. The morning of the sermon Livingstone had such a fit of fear and panic that he sought to flee before the service. He took heart, however, knowing that fleeing would show distrust for God, and courageously went forth and preached on Ezekiel 36:25–26. Five hundred people ascribed their conversion to that sermon.¹

From an earthly standpoint, Israel had multiple reasons to be in great fear at the beginning of the book of Joshua. Moses

had just died (Deuteronomy 34). It was he who had led the deliverance out of Egypt, brought down the law from Sinai and taken the people to the very edges of the land of promise. He had been the covenant mediator—that is, the man who ‘stood in the breach’ between the sinful, unholy nation and the Holy One of Israel (Psalm 106:23). Now he is no longer alive to lead them, having been buried by the very hand of God. They are poised to enter and capture the land of Canaan, but how can they do those things without a leader?

In addition, Israel is facing formidable opposition in Canaan. The peoples of the land are well entrenched inside major cities that have strong defensive systems. During the Late Bronze Age, for example, the city of Hazor had a huge double casemated wall encircling the site.² Thus, we see a wandering people set to engage a mostly urbanized, settled and strong population, which has been in the land for centuries. Such a scenario would, on a human level, cause them to lose heart easily. An indication of Israel’s panic before such odds is clearly seen in their response to the report of the spies in Numbers 14:1–4.

What will happen now that Moses is dead? How will the people respond? How will they deal with their fear? How will they face the looming danger that lies across the Jordan River?

The Lord’s command (1:1–2)

The first word of the Hebrew text is properly translated as ‘and it was’, or ‘and it came to pass’; it is a term that indicates historical sequence and connection to something that went before. The book of Deuteronomy had ended with the death of Moses, and now the Lord turns to speak to Joshua, the successor to Moses. Joshua is called the ‘minister’, or ‘assistant’ of Moses; this word, or its related verb, is employed in the Old Testament of a chief

servant or one who acts as a right-hand man (Genesis 39:4; 40:4), and sometimes specifically of one who stands next in line for a position (1 Kings 19:21). Joshua has been trained for this very task. Therefore, the opening answer to the fear of the people is that *God has appointed a replacement for Moses*: the new leader and covenant mediator is Joshua (see his commissioning in Deuteronomy 31:1-8).

We need to recognize that God is the constant one in this story. People come and go. Leaders come and go. But the Lord and his word remain for ever. When George Müller was asked, ‘What, Mr Müller, will become of the Orphan Houses, when you are removed?’ Müller replied, ‘The Orphan Houses, and the land belonging to them, are vested in the hand of eleven trustees...’ The response was: ‘But where will you find the man who will carry on the work in the same spirit in which you do, trusting only in God for everything that in any way is needed in connection with the work?’ Müller answered, ‘When the Lord shall have been pleased to remove me from my post, He will prove that He was not dependent on me, and that He can easily raise up another servant of His to act on the same principles on which I have sought to carry on this work.’ Thus Israel is not to set her chief affections and trust on a leader, but on the constant God.

The second answer to Israel’s fear is that *God had deeded the land of promise to the people of Israel*. Three times in the passage God employs the verb ‘to give’ (1:2,3,6). Canaan is simply a gift from the hand of God. And, furthermore, the giving of the land to them is a fulfilment of God’s promise to the sons of Israel that he made as far back as the time of Abraham. In Genesis 12, Abram ‘came to the land of Canaan’ (v. 5), and God appeared to him and promised, ‘To your offspring I will give this land’ (v. 7).

God repeatedly made this promise to the patriarchs (Genesis 13:15; 15:18; 17:8) and to the people of Israel when they were enslaved in Egypt (Exodus 6:8). Now is the time when God will keep his promise!

The inheritance (1:3–4)

The amount and extent of the land that God is giving to Israel is now defined. The Lord first says that their inheritance will include ‘every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon’. This metaphorical expression in the Old Testament refers to the practice of gaining formal title to a land by walking through it (see Deuteronomy 11:24). In ancient Near-Eastern literature, examples exist of kings who walk through lands in order to demonstrate their ownership and authority over those areas.³

In verse 4, God provides greater detail concerning the size of Israel’s land inheritance, yet it is only a general outline of the territory included. Their land will extend from ‘the wilderness’, which obviously refers to the desert lands to the south of Canaan, to the Euphrates River, which lies to the north-east of Canaan. The western boundary of the inheritance will be the ‘Great Sea’, where the sun sets—namely, the Mediterranean Sea. For a more specific delineation of Israel’s inheritance boundaries in the land of promise, see Numbers 34:1–12.

Land grants with specific boundaries are common features of ancient Near-Eastern covenants.⁴ Joshua 1:1–4 looks like a royal land grant typically made by a king (here, the Lord) to a vassal or subordinate (here, Israel).

The Immanuel principle (1:5)

Another reason is now given why Israel should not be afraid, but rather should forge ahead and conquer the land of Canaan.

No man 'shall ... stand before' Joshua all the days of his life; this Hebrew idiom means that no one will be able to withstand Joshua and Israel or defeat them (see Deuteronomy 7:24). No enemy will be able to oppose Joshua because the Lord is with him as he was with Moses. This is the Immanuel principle, in which the term 'Immanuel' literally means, 'God is with us.' The presence of the sovereign God with his people should, in fact, drown out Israel's debilitating fear and embolden them to act. Again, Yahweh is constant, giving and trustworthy; therefore, the people should not be afraid.

Be strong and courageous (1:6-9)

How are Joshua and Israel to react to the command of God that they cross into the land of promise? First, the Lord, using imperatival forms, says three times that the people are to be 'strong and courageous'; the Hebrew language often employs repetition for the purpose of emphasis. Israel is to respond to God's commands with valour, daring and fortitude. They are in no way to be passive, but they are to prepare themselves, take heart and have backbone to fight.

Secondly, God demands that Israel obey his Scriptures that he gave in the Torah. The people are about to enter a land full of wickedness and violence, and their primary safeguard against the ways and means of the ungodly is God's Word. The Torah, in fact, is not to depart from their mouths, and the people are to 'meditate on it day and night'. The latter phrase is an example of a merism, a set of opposites that are all-inclusive. Thus, the Israelites are to ponder God's Word and its application to them diligently and consistently as they enter the land of promise. Remember what Moses said to the people as they stood in the plains of Moab looking across the Jordan River at the land of promise: 'Take to heart all the words by which I am warning you

today, that you may command them to your children, that they may be careful to do all the words of this law. For it is no empty word for you, but your very life, and by this word you shall live long in the land that you are going over the Jordan to possess' (Deuteronomy 32:46-47).

Points to ponder

1. God's threefold provision for his people

The people of Israel are facing an overwhelming task at the beginning of the book of Joshua. God has commanded that they cross over the Jordan River and capture the land of promise, which is filled with foes. Yet God has not left the people to themselves to carry out their duty. He has equipped Israel to stand up to their enemies in three ways: firstly, God promises to be with Israel as they enter the land of Canaan; secondly, he raises strong leadership in the person of Joshua; and, thirdly, he gives the people his Word to stand on and to live by.

God continues to equip his people in the church in these very same ways. When Jesus gave the church the commission to 'make disciples of all nations', he said, 'And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age' (Matthew 28:19,20). The Lord is with his people. And he continues to establish strong leadership in the church; for example, when Paul spoke to the elders at Ephesus he encouraged them to take care of the flock, in 'which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers' (Acts 20:28). And, indeed, the church has the Word of God, which is 'living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword' (Hebrews 4:12). For, 'All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work' (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

2. *Courage in the face of trials*

God's people, whether in Joshua's day or today, are not to fear, but they are to be 'strong and courageous'. When Martin Luther was travelling to the Diet of Worms, where he was to go on trial before the Roman Catholic Church, he was told that he would be given no safe conduct. As Luther neared the city for the trial, a friendly priest warned him, 'Do not enter the city!' But Luther, undismayed, looked at the priest and said, 'Even should there be as many devils in Worms as tiles upon the housetops, still I would enter it.' Luther claimed, 'I was undaunted... I feared nothing.'

In the midst of those great trials, Luther responded with great courage. During the darkest times, he would say, 'Come, let us sing the 46th Psalm, and let them do their worst.' On the basis of Psalm 46, Luther wrote the awe-inspiring hymn 'A Mighty Fortress is our God':

And though this world, with devils filled,
 should threaten to undo us,
We will not fear, for God has willed,
 his truth to triumph through us.
The prince of darkness grim—
 we tremble not for him;
His rage we can endure,
 for, lo! his doom is sure;
One little word shall fell him.