

INTRODUCTION
TO THE BOOK OF JOSHUA*A New Beginning*

Why should anybody today study the Book of Joshua, an ancient book that gives a grim account of war, slaughter, and conquest? If the Book of Joshua were fiction, we might accept it as an exciting adventure story; but the book conveys real history and is a part of inspired Holy Scripture. What does it mean to us today?

"There never was a good war, or a bad peace," Benjamin Franklin wrote in 1783; but it's possible that the wise old patriot was wrong for once. After all, God called Joshua to be a general and to lead the army of Israel in holy conquest. *But there were bigger issues involved in that conquest than the invasion and possession of a land—issues that touch our lives and our faith today.*

That's why we're embarking on this study. The Book of Joshua is the book of new beginnings for the people of God, and many believers today need a new beginning. After forty years of wandering in the wilderness, Israel claimed their inheritance and enjoyed the blessings of the land that God had prepared for them, "as the days of heaven upon the earth" (Deut. 11:21). That's the kind of life God wants us to experience today. Jesus Christ, our Joshua, wants to lead us

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in conquest *now* and share with us all the treasures of His wonderful inheritance. He has "blessed us with all spiritual blessings" (Eph. 1:3), but too often we live like defeated paupers.

1. The new leader

From Exodus 3 to Deuteronomy 34, the Bible focuses attention on the ministry of Moses, God's chosen servant to lead the nation of Israel. But Moses died; and though he would not be forgotten (he's named over fifty times in the Book of Joshua), a new "servant of the Lord" (Josh. 24:29) would take his place. "God buries His workers, but His work goes on." We shall note later that this change in leadership carries with it a tremendous spiritual lesson for believers who want to experience God's best in their lives.

Joshua the slave. God spent many years preparing Joshua for his calling. He was born into slavery in Egypt and was given the name Hoshea (Num. 13:8), which means "salvation." Moses later changed it to Joshua (v. 16, NIV), "Jehovah is salvation," which is the Hebrew form of "Jesus" (Matt. 1:21; see Acts 7:45 and Heb. 4:8). When his parents gave the baby the name "salvation," they were bearing witness to their faith in God's promise of redemption for His people (Gen. 15:12-16; 50:24-26). Joshua belonged to the tribe of Ephraim and was the firstborn son of Nun (1 Chron. 7:20-27). This meant that his life was in danger the night of Passover, but he had faith in the Lord and was protected by the blood of the lamb (Ex. 11-12).

While in Egypt, Joshua saw all the signs and wonders that God performed (Ex. 7-12); and he knew that Jehovah was a God of power who would care for His people. The Lord had humiliated the gods of Egypt and demonstrated that He alone was the true God (Ex. 12:12; Num. 33:4). Joshua saw the Lord open the Red Sea and then close the waters and drown

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the pursuing Egyptian army (Ex. 14-15). Joshua was a man of faith who knew the Lord and trusted Him to do wonders for His people.

Joshua the soldier. The first official recorded act of Joshua in Scripture is his defeat of the Amalekites when they attacked Israel about two months after Israel's exodus from Egypt (17:8-16). Moses was a prophet and legislator, but Joshua was a general with exceptional military skills. He was also a man of great courage, who wasn't afraid to confront the enemy and trust the Lord for victory.

Where did Joshua learn to use a sword and to command an army? Certainly he was especially gifted by the Lord, but even heavenly gifts must be discovered and developed in an earthly setting. Had Joshua in some way been involved with the Egyptian army and received his early training in its ranks? This is possible, though the Scriptures are silent and we must not be dogmatic. Just as Moses refused a high position in Pharaoh's palace but received his education there (Heb. 11:24-26; Acts 7:22), so Joshua may have turned down army promotions that he might identify with his people and serve the Lord.

According to Exodus 17:14, the writer suggests that God had chosen Joshua for a special work in the future. Unknown to Joshua, the battle with Amalek was a testing time when God was examining his faith and courage. "Make every occasion a great occasion, for you can never tell when someone may be taking your measure for a larger place" (Marsden). Joshua's conflict with Amalek was the preparation for many battles he would fight in the Promised Land.

Joshua the servant. In Exodus 24:13, Joshua is called Moses' servant ("minister"), which indicates that Joshua was now an official assistant to the leader of Israel. He accompanied Moses to the mount and went with him when he judged the people for making the golden calf (32:17). It wasn't enough

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that Joshua be a good warrior; he also had to know the God of Israel and the holy laws God gave His people to obey. We shall discover that the secret of Joshua's victories was not his skill with the sword but his submission to the Word of God (Josh. 1:8) and to the God of the Word (5:13-15).

During Israel's wilderness journey, Moses had a special tent set up outside the camp where he could meet with God (Ex. 33:7-11). It was Joshua's responsibility to stay at the tent and guard it. Not only was Joshua a warrior, but he was also a worshiper and knew how to live in the presence of God.

Joshua was jealous not only for the glory of God but also for the honor and authority of Moses. This is a good characteristic for a servant to have, and it showed up when God sent His Spirit upon the seventy elders Moses had chosen to assist him in his work (Num. 11:16-30). When the Spirit came upon Eldad and Medad in the camp, two men who had not assembled with the other elders at the tabernacle, Joshua protested and asked Moses to stop them from prophesying. (For a New Testament parallel, see Luke 9:49-50.) The breadth of Moses' spirit must have moved Joshua as Moses claimed no special privileges for himself. It's worth noting that when the inheritance was allotted after the conquest of the Promised Land, Joshua took his share last (Josh. 19:49-51).

Joshua the spy. When Israel arrived at Kadesh Barnea, on the border of the Promised Land, God commanded Moses to appoint twelve men to spy out the land of Canaan—Joshua among them (Num. 13). After forty days of investigating the land, the spies returned to Moses and reported that the land was indeed a good one. But ten of the spies discouraged the people by saying that Israel wasn't strong enough to overcome the enemy, while two of the spies—Caleb and Joshua—encouraged the people to trust God and move into the land. Sadly the people listened to the faithless ten spies. It was this

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act of unbelief and rebellion that delayed the conquest of the land for forty years.

This crisis revealed some fine leadership qualities in Joshua. He was not blind to the realities of the situation, but he didn't allow the problems and difficulties to rob him of his faith in God. The ten spies looked at God through the difficulties, while Joshua and Caleb looked at the difficulties through what they knew about God. Their God was big enough for the battles that lay ahead!

Knowing he was right, Joshua wasn't afraid to stand up against the majority. He, Moses, and Caleb stood alone and risked their lives in so doing; *but God stood with them*. It has well been said that "one with God is a majority." It would take that kind of courage for Joshua to lead Israel into their land so they could defeat their enemies and claim their inheritance.

Think of the years of blessing in the Promised Land that Joshua forfeited because the people had no faith in God! But Joshua patiently stayed with Moses and did his job, knowing that one day he and Caleb would get their promised inheritance (Num. 14:1-9). Leaders must know not only how to win victories but also how to accept defeats. I have a suspicion that Joshua and Caleb met each other regularly and encouraged each other as the time of their inheritance drew near. Day after day, for forty years, they saw the older generation die off, but each day brought them closer to Canaan. (See Heb. 10:22-25 for a New Testament parallel.)

Joshua the successor. Throughout that wilderness journey, God was preparing Joshua for his ministry as successor to Moses. When Israel defeated Og, king of Bashan, Moses used that victory to encourage Joshua not to be afraid of his enemies (Deut. 3:21-28; Num. 21:33-35). When Moses was preparing to die, he asked God to give the people a leader; and God appointed Joshua (27:12-23; Deut. 3:23-29). In his final

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message to Israel, Moses told the people that God would use Joshua to defeat their enemies and help them claim their promised inheritance; and he also encouraged Joshua to trust God and not be afraid (31:1-8). Moses laid hands on Joshua and God imparted to Joshua the spiritual power he needed for his task (34:9).

Like Moses, Joshua was human and made his share of mistakes; but he was still God's chosen and anointed leader, and the people knew this. This is why they said to Joshua, "Just as we heeded Moses in all things, so we will heed you" (Josh. 1:17, NKJV). God's people in the church today need to acknowledge God's leaders and give them the respect that they deserve as the servants of God (1 Thes. 5:12-13).

The secret of Joshua's success was his faith in the Word of God (Josh. 1:7-9), its commandments and its promises. God's Word to Joshua was "Be strong!" (vv. 6-7, 9, 18; and see Deut. 31:6-7, 23); and this is His Word to His people today.

2. The new land

The promise of the land. The word "land" is found eighty-seven times in the Book of Joshua because this book is the record of Israel's entering, conquering, and claiming the Promised Land. God promised to give the land to Abraham (Gen. 12:1-7; 13:15-17; 15:7, 18; 17:8; 24:7), and He reaffirmed the promise to Isaac (26:1-5), Jacob (28:4, 13, 15; 35:12), and their descendants (50:24). The Exodus narrative gives many reaffirmations of the promise (3:8, 17; 6:4, 8; 12:25; 13:5, 11; 16:35; 23:20-33; 33:1-3; 34:10-16), and these are repeated in Leviticus (14:34; 18:3; 19:23; 20:22-24; 23:10; 25:2, 38) and Numbers (11:12; 15:2, 18; 16:13-14; 20:12, 24; 27:12; 33:53; 34:2, 12). (See also 1 Chron. 16:14-18.)

In Moses' "farewell speech" (Deut.), he frequently mentioned the land and the nation's responsibility to possess it. The word "land" is found nearly 200 times in Deuteronomy

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and the word "possess" over 50 times. Israel *owned* the land because of God's gracious covenant with Abraham (Gen. 12:1-5), but their *enjoyment* of the land depended on their faithful obedience to God. (See Lev. 26 and Deut. 28-30.) As long as the Jews obeyed God's law He blessed them, and they prospered in the land. But when they turned from God to idols, God first chastened them *in the land* (the Book of Judges); and then He took them *from their land* to the land of Babylon. After they had been chastened for seventy years, Israel returned to their land; but they never fully recovered the glory and blessing that they once had known.

God called the Promised Land "a good land" (8:7-10) and contrasted it with the monotony and barrenness of Egypt (11:8-14). It was to be Israel's place of rest, her inheritance, and the dwelling place of God (12:9,11). After enduring slavery in Egypt and misery in the wilderness, the Jews would finally find rest in their Promised Land (Josh. 1:13,15; 11:23; 21:44; 22:4; 23:1). This concept of "rest" will show up again in Psalm 95:11 and Hebrews 4 as an illustration of the victory Christians can have if they give their all to the Lord.

The Prophet Ezekiel called the land of Israel "the glory of all lands" (Ezek. 20:6,15), which the NIV translates "the most beautiful of all lands." Daniel calls it "the pleasant land" (8:9) and "the glorious land" (11:16 and 41). Often it is described as "a land flowing with milk and honey" (Ex. 3:8, 17; 13:5; 33:3; Lev. 20:24; Num. 13:27; Deut. 6:3; 11:9; etc.). This was a proverbial statement meaning "a land of plenty," a place of peaceful pastures and gardens where the herds could graze and the bees could gather pollen and make honey.

The importance of the land. The Prophet Ezekiel said that Jerusalem was "in the center of the nations" (5:5, NTV) and that the land of Israel was "the center of the world" (38:12, NASB). The Hebrew word translated "center" also means "navel," suggesting that Israel was the "lifeline" between God

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and this world; for "salvation is of the Jews" (John 4:22). *God chose the land of Israel to be the "stage" on which the great drama of redemption would be presented.*

In Genesis 3:15, God promised to send a Savior to the world; and the first step in the fulfilling of that promise was the call of Abraham. Beginning with Genesis 12, the Old Testament record focuses on the Jews and the land of Israel. Abraham left Ur of the Chaldees to go to that new land, and there Isaac and Jacob were born. God announced that the Redeemer would come from the tribe of Judah (49:10) and the family of David (2 Sam. 7). He would be born of a virgin in Bethlehem (Isa. 7:14; Micah 5:2) and one day die for the sins of the world (Isa. 53; Ps. 22). All these important events in the drama of redemption would take place in the land of Israel, the land that Joshua was called to conquer and claim.

3. The new life

It's unfortunate that some of our Christian songs have equated Israel's crossing the Jordan with the believer's dying and going to heaven, because this mistake brings confusion when you start interpreting the Book of Joshua. "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" is a beloved spiritual, but I fear its imagery is not biblical. The hymn "On Jordan's Stormy Banks" perpetuates that same error, as does the third verse of "Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah":

When I tread the verge of Jordan,
Bid my anxious fears subside;
Death of death, and hell's destruction,
Land me safe on Canaan's side.

(William Williams)

The events recorded in the Book of Joshua have to do with the *life* of God's people and not their *death!* The Book of

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Joshua records battles, defeats, sins, and failures—none of which will take place in heaven. This book illustrates how believers today can say good-bye to the old life and enter into their rich inheritance in Jesus Christ. It explains how we can meet our enemies and defeat them, and how to claim for ourselves all that we have in Jesus Christ (Eph. 1:3). What Paul's letter to the Ephesians explains doctrinally, the Book of Joshua illustrates practically. It shows us how to claim our *riches* in Christ.

But it also shows us how to claim our *rest* in Christ. This is one of the major themes of the Book of Hebrews and is explained in chapters 3 and 4 of that epistle. In those chapters, we find four different "rests," all of which are related: God's Sabbath rest after creating the worlds (Heb. 4:4; Gen. 2:2); the salvation rest we have in Christ (Heb. 4:1, 3, 8-9; Matt. 11:28-30); the believer's eternal rest in heaven (Heb. 4:11); and the rest God gave Israel after their conquest of Canaan (3:7-19).

God's promise to Moses was "My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest" (Ex. 33:14, NKJV). The Jews certainly had no rest in Egypt or during their wilderness wanderings; but in the Promised Land, God would give them rest. In his farewell message to the people, Moses said, "For as yet you have not come to the rest and the inheritance which the Lord your God is giving you" (Deut. 12:9, NKJV; and see 3:20; 12:9-10; 25:19). *This "Canaan rest" is a picture of the rest that Christian believers experience when they yield their all to Christ and claim their inheritance by faith.*

The four geographic locations seen in the history of Israel illustrate four spiritual experiences. *Egypt* was the place of death and bondage from which Israel was delivered. They were delivered from death by the blood of the lamb and from bondage by the power of God who opened the Red Sea and took them across safely. This illustrates the salvation we

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have through faith in Jesus Christ, "The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29, NKJV) Through His death and resurrection, Jesus Christ delivers the believing sinner from bondage and judgment.

The wilderness experience of Israel depicts believers who live in unbelief and disobedience and don't enter into the rest and riches of their inheritance in Christ, either because they don't know it's there or they know and refuse to enter. Like Israel, they come to a crisis place (Kadesh Barnea), but refuse to obey the Lord and claim His will for their lives (Num. 13-14). They are delivered from Egypt, but Egypt is still in their hearts; and like the Jews, they have a desire to go back to the old life (Ex. 16:1-3; Num. 11; 14:2-4; see Isa. 30:3; 31:1). Instead of marching through life as conquerors, they meander through life as wanderers and never enjoy the fullness of what God has planned for them. It's this crowd that is especially addressed in the Epistle to the Hebrews.

Canaan represents the Christian life as it ought to be: conflict and victory, faith and obedience, spiritual riches and rest. It's a life of faith, trusting Jesus Christ, our Joshua, the Captain of our salvation (Heb. 2:10), to lead us from victory to victory (1 John 5:4-5). When Israel was in Egypt, the enemy was *around* them, making their lives miserable. When they crossed the Red Sea, Israel put the enemy *behind* them; but when the nation crossed the Jordan River, they saw new enemies *before* them, and they conquered these enemies by faith.

The victorious Christian life isn't a once-for-all triumph that ends all our problems. As pictured by Israel in the Book of Joshua, the victorious Christian life is a series of conflicts and victories as we defeat one enemy after another and claim more of our inheritance to the glory of God. The eminent Scottish preacher Alexander Whyte used to say that the victorious Christian life was "a series of new beginnings."

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According to Joshua 11:23, the whole land was taken; but according to 13:1, there remained "very much land to be possessed." Is this a contradiction? No, it's the declaration of a basic spiritual truth: In Christ, we have all that we need for victorious Christian living, but we must possess our inheritance by faith, a step at a time (Josh. 1:3), a day at a time. Joshua's question to his people is a good question to ask the church today: "How long will you wait before you begin to take possession of the land that the Lord... has given you?" (18:3, NIV)

The fourth geographic location on Israel's "spiritual map" is *Babylon*, where the nation endured seventy years of captivity because they disobeyed God and worshiped the idols of the pagan nations around them. (See 2 Chron. 36; Jer. 39:8-10). When God's children are willfully rebellious, their loving Father must chasten them until they learn to be submissive and obedient (Heb. 12:1-11). When they confess their sins and forsake them, God will forgive and restore His children to fellowship and fruitfulness (1 John 1:9; 2 Cor. 7:1).

The leading person in the Book of Joshua is not Joshua but the Lord Jehovah, the God of Joshua and of Israel. In all that Joshua did by faith, he desired to glorify the Lord. When the Jews crossed the Jordan River, Joshua reminded them that the living God was among them and would overcome their enemies (Josh. 3:10). Through Israel's obedience, Joshua wanted all the people of the earth to know the Lord and fear Him (4:23-24). In his "farewell addresses" to the leaders (chap. 23) and to the nation (chap. 24), Joshua gave God all the glory for what Israel had accomplished under his leadership.

At least fourteen times in this book, God is called "the Lord God of Israel" (7:13, 19-20; 8:30; 9:18-19; 10:40, 42; 13:14, 33; 14:14; 22:24; 24:2, 23). *Everything that Israel did brought either glory or disgrace to the name of their God.* When

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Israel obeyed by faith, God kept His promises and worked on their behalf; and God was glorified. But when they disobeyed in unbelief, God abandoned them to their own ways and they were humiliated in defeat. The same spiritual principle applies to the church today.

As you look at your life and the life of the church where you fellowship, do you see yourself and your fellow believers wandering in the wilderness or conquering in the Promised Land? In the wilderness, the Jews were a complaining people; but in Canaan, they were a conquering people. In the wilderness, Israel kept looking back, yearning for what they had in Egypt; but in the Promised Land, they looked forward to conquering the enemy and claiming their rest and their riches. The wilderness march was an experience of delay, defeat, and death; but their experience in Canaan was one of life, power, and victory.

As you look at the "spiritual map" of your Christian life, where are you living?