

## *Acting on God's Promises – The Book of Joshua*

Hello. It's Joy Woodfield here, introducing the study on Joshua. Just a little about myself.

- I grew up in a country town in North Queensland, but some years ago my husband and I moved to Toowoomba.
- We have five adult children, and sixteen grandchildren. When our family gets together, it can be very noisy.
- I have studied with KYB since 1975. I know the year because I was pregnant with one of our girls at the time. A lady once asked me: *"Why are you still studying the Bible? Surely you know it by now!"* I tried to explain that studying the Bible is more than just studying a textbook, as it is all about a relationship with the Book's Author.
- KYB is huge in my life. Currently we have two enthusiastic groups which meet in our home.
- The book of Joshua has been important in my life for many years, mainly because of the timeless and encouraging words of the Lord to Joshua in chapter one: *"Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go."* Even the words: *"Get your supplies ready"* has come to mind at various times when I need to get going and prepare for something. **Now for the Introduction:**

I wonder how many of us have been asked at some time to do something for which we have felt totally inadequate.

- Perhaps we have to deliver a speech in front of a large crowd. There is the nervous anticipation. Will I collapse in fright? Will my voice waver? Will people laugh at me?
- Or maybe we have had to face the very difficult challenge of visiting a dying loved one.
- Someone may have asked us to teach a group, or to lead a Bible study.
- And then there is that bane of many lives: Praying out loud in front of others. I remember my early reluctance with this, and a lecture from my good friend: *"Now Joy, you have to learn to do this! You never know when someone will be sick, and you will need to pray with them."*
- Some commitments can only be faced one day at a time, for example, caring for a newborn baby. Our first baby put up with a lot from his fumbling parents.

There are so many things which may feel daunting and frankly frightening. Some of us have personalities which can more easily handle new things and even upfront roles. However, I believe it would be difficult to find a task more daunting than the task which Joshua faced. Joshua's story is told in the sixth book in our Bibles.

The previous books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy contain a record of an amazing journey undertaken by God's people, that is, by the descendants of a man named Abraham.

Hundreds of years earlier, God had covenanted to give the land of Canaan to Abraham's descendants.

- A covenant is a formal binding agreement defining relationships and responsibilities between two or more parties. In the book of Genesis, God promised to bless Abraham and his family, and through them to bless all nations on earth.

When Joshua was born, God's people, the descendants of Abraham, had been living in Egypt for hundreds of years. But now, under Moses' leadership, they at last were on the move, heading for Canaan, their Promised Land. The people's journey was not yet complete when their leader Moses died.

- In fact, they were camped beside the Jordan River on Canaan's border.
- By this stage, God had appointed his choice of a new leader: Joshua, who was about seventy years old at this time.
- When we turn to the book of Joshua, Moses already had commissioned Joshua before all the people, and Joshua was about to take the people across the Jordan and right into the Promised Land.
- There in Canaan, different sections of the land were to be distributed by lot for the different Israelite tribes. We must remember that these people had never before had a land of their own, but had been wanderers, slaves, refugees.
- At this stage the people already had spent forty years of wandering in the desert, God's judgment for their unbelief.
- And now a new generation of people had been led by Moses as far as the eastern side of the Jordan.
- Bible scholars differ on the timing, but the conquest of Canaan happened at least 1200 years before the coming of Christ. It is likely that the events in the book of Joshua covered several decades.

Note that this Promised Land wasn't vacant land and theirs for the taking.

- It was fully settled by pagan idol-worshippers who were hostile and fierce and had a sophisticated culture.
- Many were of enormous stature, and their cities were well-fortified.
- There was warfare ahead! Israel's foot-soldiers would be fighting an enemy that possessed horse-drawn chariots, the latest warfare weapon of mass destruction.
- However, Israel's trust was to be in the LORD, not in human resources.
- And the Israelites would not receive their inheritance by standing on the sidelines and waiting.
- They had to trust the promises of God as they moved ahead and claimed their portions.

Already Joshua had experienced warfare as a soldier in Israel's army.

He had seen remarkable victories given by God himself along the way to Canaan. And he had experienced first-hand that God is the real leader of the people.

- God, though the mighty King of Heaven, Creator of all, was firmly in charge of the battles.

You may ask: What was so daunting for Joshua in his new role as leader?

- To me, three things stand out as being particularly challenging for him, and you may find others.
  - I am sure many of you today in any leadership role – large or small - can relate to at least one of Joshua's challenges:
1. Joshua had to follow in the footsteps of an amazing predecessor.
  2. He had to lead a diverse and often difficult people.
  3. He also had the challenge of handling failure.

## **1. FOLLOWING IN ANOTHER'S FOOTSTEPS**

Have you been asked to be successor to a leader of exceptional qualities? You may be wondering: *How will I ever cope?* Well, Joshua was being asked to follow on from Moses – of all people!

- Moses – who was unmistakably one of the most famous men in the biblical narrative.
- Moses – who for forty years had been leading more than two million Israelites (Exodus 12:37).
- Moses – who is recognised as the writer of the first five books of the Bible.
- Moses – who under God, performed signs and wonders.
- Moses – whose name is known even today in secular circles as well as in religious history.

Moses actually had a very special commendation from God Himself. In the book of Deuteronomy, we read:

*“Since [Moses' death], no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face, who did all those signs and wonders the LORD sent him to do in Egypt...No one has ever shown the mighty power or performed the awesome deeds that Moses did in the sight of all Israel” (Deuteronomy 34:10,11a,12).*

But of course, human leaders, though capable and righteous, cannot live forever on this earth. At the great age of 120 years, Moses had died and had been buried by God himself.

The book of Joshua begins:

*“After the death of Moses, the servant of the LORD, the LORD said to Joshua son of Nun, Moses’ aide: ‘Moses my servant is dead. Now then, you and all these people, get ready to cross the Jordan River into the land I am about to give... to the Israelites...’”* (Joshua 1:1).

Note that God’s first words to Joshua were blunt and bracing: *“Moses my servant is dead.”* He is dead, Joshua. It is no use wishing otherwise. You may be in mourning, but it is time to move on too.

- If we live long enough, at some stage we all have to face the difficult reality of losing someone we love.
- Perhaps as we grieve, we are feeling that our loved one is indispensable to our well-being and happiness.
- Our loving Lord understands grief and mourning! God has given to us the ability to love and he has given us the gift of tears.
- Jesus, though Lord of heaven and earth, is seen weeping at the tomb of his beloved friend Lazarus.

It also is possible that we have greatly admired a leader, but now we are experiencing the loss of their presence with us.

- It may be through illness rather than death.
- Or the beloved leader may move on, leaving us behind.
- We may be wondering: *Who now will take their place? Will things ever be the same?*

I recall a time when one of God’s choice church leaders had departed for the overseas mission field. A lady from the sending church mourned: *“If only we had that man here again! Then our church would be able to achieve so much more, just as we did in the past.”*

An elderly man gave the bracing and wise reply: *“Yes, he isn’t here, but God hasn’t left us! Think of what God can do still, equipping us and continuing to work out his good purposes.”*

Indeed, life goes on, and God hasn’t left us alone, just as God promised Joshua.

- There were two million people needing Joshua’s strong leadership and direction without delay.
- There was a Jordan River to be crossed.
- There were battles to be fought and won.
- God’s people needed to move into their new homeland and claim their inheritance.

Was God calling Joshua to a task for which he had not fitted him? Does God call us to a task for which he has not fitted us?

- Maybe if you look back on your life, you will see that God has already been at work, preparing you for your next steps.

- Be assured that God will be there to help you, to support and encourage you.
- He will give you his wisdom; you have only to ask him for it.
- His Holy Spirit is there to guide you as you go along.

The book of Joshua is really a historical record with God Himself as the main 'character' rather than Joshua.

- Before Joshua conquered even one city, the commander of God's heavenly armies met him with a challenge.
- It was not so much that Joshua and Israel must fight their battles with God alongside them to help them.
- It was rather that they must fight God's battles with Joshua taking orders from the heavenly commander (Joshua 5:13-15). And, face-down, Joshua received his battle orders.

I always find it helpful to remember who is the real Owner of the work to which the Lord calls us.

- And I am convinced that God loves problems, especially the ones which we cannot solve on our own.
- I confess that many times I have reminded the Lord (and myself) that it is his work, not mine, and I am off to bed, leaving him to sort it all out.

Have you ever noticed in the Bible that God doesn't waste our past experiences? He loves to use them for his own purposes. Take Moses as an example.

- Moses came from an enslaved but godly family. No silver spoon there.
- Adopted by the Pharaoh's daughter, Moses was equipped with an incredible first-class Egyptian education while living in Pharaoh's palace.
- Moses in the palace had forty years of learning to be 'Somebody', and could understand the ways of Egypt's hierarchy.
- But Moses chose to identify with his own people... and then made a muck of it.
- After fleeing for his life, Moses cared for flocks in the wilderness.
- Moses then as a 'Nobody' had forty years to grow in faith and trust in God.
- It was in the final forty years of Moses' life that he had to confront a hostile Pharaoh before shepherding God's people through the familiar wilderness.

How had God been preparing Joshua for his new leadership role?

- Though born a slave in Egypt, Joshua's family belonged to the prominent and leading tribe of Ephraim (Genesis 48:19).
- Joshua at birth had been given the name Hoshea, meaning 'Salvation'.
- But Moses changed Hoshea's name to Joshua, meaning 'the LORD saves', a powerful reminder to Joshua that true salvation was from God.
- (You may know that the name 'Joshua' actually is the Hebrew form of the beautiful Greek name, 'Jesus'.)
- During the wilderness journey Joshua led Israel to victory in battle against the powerful Amalekites (Exodus 17:13).

- Joshua became an assistant to Moses (Numbers 11:28) where he could observe Moses' godly leadership style, and Moses' great longing for a holy people.
- Joshua had the wonderful privilege of accompanying Moses to Mt Sinai where Moses met with the LORD and received the famous tablets of stone (Exodus 24:12-18, 32:15-17).
- Joshua also was able regularly to accompany Moses into the sacred meeting tent. Joshua's desire to be in the Lord's Presence meant that, even when Moses returned to the camp, the book of Exodus tells us that "[Moses'] young assistant Joshua ... did not leave the tent" (Exodus 33:11).
- This young Joshua distinguished himself in the early days of the wilderness journey when sent out from his tribe along with eleven other tribal representatives to spy out the Promised Land.
- The twelve spies agreed that the land of Canaan indeed was a land 'flowing with milk and honey', just as God had promised.
- However, only Joshua and Caleb among the twelve leaders believed that God would enable former slaves to conquer the people of the land (Numbers 13-14).

And now Moses was dead and it was time to move into Canaan. God had some words to prepare Joshua for the task ahead: *"As I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will never leave you nor forsake you... Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go"* (Joshua 1:5b-6a, 9).

God then challenged Joshua to be careful to obey all the law that Moses had given. Joshua wasn't to turn from it to the right or to the left, so that he would be successful wherever he went (Joshua 1:7b-8a).

- Through knowing and acting on God's law, Joshua would be able to guide these people, patiently encouraging them to obey.
- Moses in writing the first five books of the Bible, had set out Israel's basic constitution and laws. Even though Joshua's book follows on, there is not a single law in the book. Rather we can see how God's law is worked out in practice.
- And Joshua himself is regarded as a prophet just like Moses, in that he heard from God and spoke for God to the people. Deuteronomy tells us that Joshua was filled with the spirit of wisdom (Deuteronomy 34:9).

## **2. GOD'S PEOPLE**

Who were these people known as the children of Israel?

- Today we might refer to the descendants of Abraham as "Israelites" or simply as "Jewish" people.
- Hundreds of years earlier, God called Abraham to leave his own country and go to the country of Canaan, largely identified as Palestine on today's maps. In most study Bibles, there are maps. If you have one of these, you may wish to locate the Promised Land of Canaan on a map. Look for the Jordan River which

had to be crossed, and then note the names and locations of the various tribal inheritances.

**Pause disc**.....

- God had promised Abraham that, though as yet he owned no property in Canaan, one day his descendants would be given this land, “*from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates*” (Genesis 15:18).

Approximately six hundred years had passed between the lives of Joshua and Abraham. You may ask: Why weren't God's people actually living in their own land by Joshua's time?

- Some 430 years earlier, a severe famine in the days of Abraham's grandson Jacob, sent Jacob and his family to Egypt where there was food.
- After a long time of living in Egypt, the descendants of Abraham had grown and multiplied enormously.
- The numbers were so great that, through fear, the Egyptians enslaved the Israelites dwelling in their midst. God's people were suffering under cruel bondage.

And so, God had called Moses to head up the rescue mission, and to lead the people back to their original heritage in Canaan.

- God made every provision for the people for this wilderness journey – guiding, sheltering, feeding and organising them.

You could be forgiven for thinking that the people would be grateful and eager to cooperate with God's plan for them to escape from cruel slavery.

- But it was not so with many, who grumbled and complained in their tents and even said that God had brought them into the desert to kill them.
- Many were so bold as to say that they wanted to return to Egypt.
- Because of the people's unbelief and failure to trust in God's leading and provision, the journey which should have taken a matter of days, became forty years of wanderings in these desert regions.
- Eventually that generation of adults – except for Joshua and Caleb - died.

Yes, the people had proved in the past to be a difficult and contrary bunch! And Joshua had been called to lead this new generation.

- Now this new generation was promising specifically to obey Joshua and go wherever he sent them (Joshua 1:16).
- While there always have been the beautiful and the godly among God's people, Joshua knew only too well that the human heart is sinful and prone to wander from God and his ways.

Would grumbling cease under the new leadership? Would unbelief and disobedience again rear its ugly head? Knowing the human heart, God repeatedly gave his servant Joshua the bracing words: *“Be strong and of a good courage”*.

When did Joshua have to be strong? Did his courage ever fail?

### **3. PERSONAL CHALLENGES AND VICTORIES**

Not everyone appreciates the difficulties and responsibilities involved when a leader is trying to encourage people to follow God’s ways and God’s laws.

- First of all, leaders must know God’s ways and God’s laws for themselves.
- God encouraged Joshua not to let God’s Book of the Law depart from his mouth. Joshua was to meditate on it day and night, and obey everything in it to be *“prosperous and successful”* (Joshua 1:8).

And it is so very important for us all to continue to grow in grace and in our knowledge of God’s Word.

God promised Joshua: *“As I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will not leave you nor forsake you”* (Joshua 1:5b).

- Joshua had to learn, under God, to be strong and courageous, especially when making hard choices and decisions and facing dangerous battles.

Joshua’s knowledge of Israel’s history was reflected in his decisions as he moved forward under God’s leadership.

Forty years before, Moses sent spies ahead of the people to check out the Promised Land.

- Now Joshua sent spies ahead again.

Forty years before, Joshua and the Israelites under Moses’ direction crossed the Red Sea when God dried up a path through its midst.

- Now Joshua had to lead the Israelites through a dangerously flooded Jordan River, the barrier to the Promised Land.

Remember to be strong and courageous, Joshua!

God then asked that Joshua have the Israelite males circumcised.

- Circumcision was the outward sign of participation in the covenant made by God with Abraham and his descendants.
- Israel had not performed this rite for four decades.
- But would Israel’s males submit to this directive from God?

Be strong and courageous, Joshua!



Following God's specific instructions, Israel's army marched, blew trumpets and shouted their way to victory outside the walls of Jericho.

- So why would this victorious army then suffer a most humiliating defeat when moving on to engage a small town in warfare?
- God told Joshua the reason.

Be strong and courageous, Joshua, when dealing with sin in the camp!

The shrewd Gibeonites deceived the Israelites, and there was a lot of fallout.

- Battle lines were drawn because of these Gibeonites.
- But would God rescue his people even when they had made a muck of things?

Again be strong and courageous, Joshua!

As time went on, more and more land was taken and distributed among God's people. I wonder how many of the godly and faithful among the Israelites were praying for Joshua and the other leaders to have the wisdom to keep listening to the Lord.

- That is, because ultimately it was God who was allocating the land, and the tribes were to accept the allotments as from him.
- And so where were the Levites to settle? How to deal with the women without brothers but still claiming land? What about when someone accidentally killed another person? What was to be done when civil war was about to break out?

Joshua's story is the only written account narrating the Israelites' entry into Canaan. There is no certainty as to the writer of the book of Joshua but details are mentioned which suggest that it is an eyewitness account. Notably there is the occasional use of the words "we" and "us" (for example, in Joshua chapter 5, verses 1 & 6).

- It is probable that there was an editorial hand to the book during the times of the judges and perhaps during the early monarchy.
- Note that there is a timelessness to the book in that it is a statement to the faithfulness of the LORD.

God's covenant promises to Abraham had been unconditional.

- God would keep his promises no matter how Abraham or his offspring might fail.

Under Moses, another covenant had been made to teach the new nation of Israel how to live as subjects of God the King.

- This time when God made promises, Israel also made promises, and God warned that there would be consequences if the Israelites did not keep their side of the covenant.
- This Mosaic covenant functioned in the "here and now" of each generation of Israelites, including during the time of Joshua and with later generations.

After the earlier military victories, Joshua had led the people through a time of covenant renewal (Joshua 8).

- And again as Joshua's death drew near, he urged Israel to recommit themselves to a life of obedience and complete loyalty to the LORD.

Despite Joshua's best efforts, the conquest of the land was incomplete, as the next biblical book, the book of Judges, makes clear.

- And so Joshua's book is partly an exhortation to finish the job of defeating and exterminating the Canaanites. Following Joshua's death, this responsibility then rested with the various tribes.
- You may ask: *Why had there been such a harsh directive to exterminate the Canaanites in the first place?*
- In Joshua's time, the Canaanite culture was marked by a depravity which, like Sodom and Gomorrah, cried out for God's judgement. However, the prostitute Rahab and her family were saved from this judgement because in faith she welcomed Joshua's spies (Hebrews 11:31).
- Sadly, Israel's later failure to drive out all the Canaanites, meant that Israel became corrupted by the Canaanite religion and immorality.
- The book of Judges chronicles Israel's subsequent descent into spiritual and political disaster.
- The Old Testament books which follow, record that eventually the majority of Israelites would become a nation of idol-worshippers, no different and often worse than the nations around them.
- Despite multiple warnings from the prophets sent by God, Israel chose not to take heed and repent. Eventually God allowed enemy nations to invade and conquer the Promised Land and forcibly take away the majority of the people into exile, far from their beloved homeland.

Before his death, Joshua could summarise his own commitment to his God by saying: *"Choose this day whom you will serve... but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD"* (Joshua 24:15).

- Note that Joshua had no control over the outcome and response to his words when he challenged the people to reject the idols of their forefathers.
- However, this generation of people did serve the LORD *"throughout the lifetime of Joshua and of the elders who had outlived him and who had seen all the great things the LORD had done for Israel"* (Judges 2:7).
- It was the new generation which grew up, not knowing the LORD, nor what he had done for Israel, which became evil idol-worshippers (Judges 2:12).
- How could this happen? When did parents and relatives stop telling their children about the LORD and the wonderful and awesome happenings of earlier times?
- I ask myself: *Am I careless about telling my children and grandchildren about our God and about the wonderful things he has done, and is doing?* I, like Joshua, may have no control over the response to my words, but may I at least be faithful in the telling.

Just as had been promised, the Lord had proved over and over that he did not leave Joshua nor forsake him.

This humble man who once was described as “Moses’ aide” finished his life being known as “*the servant of the LORD*” (24:29). May we too be found, serving as faithfully as Joshua did.

*Thank you for having me at your place today.*

*May the Lord bless you each one as you study this wonderful book.*