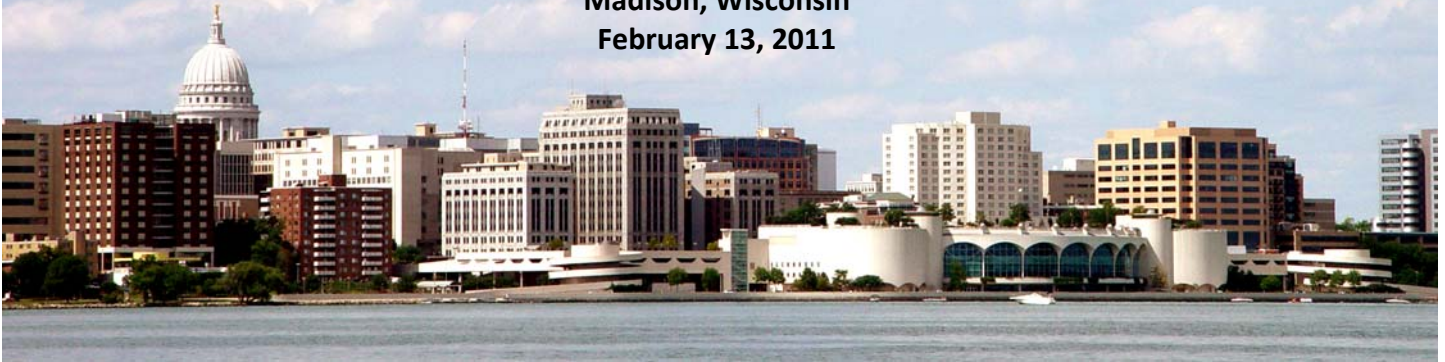


“Be Strong and Courageous”

Joshua 1:1-9

**Baxter T. Exum (#1102)
Four Lakes Church of Christ
Madison, Wisconsin
February 13, 2011**



As we look at the world around us, we realize that circumstances can change very quickly. We understand that one day we can be working in a job we enjoy, and the next day we can be packing up very quickly after what we thought was a long and rather successful career. We understand that one day we can be in a strong and healthy relationship, but then something terrible happens and it all falls apart. We understand that political circumstances can also change very quickly. With all of the turmoil down in Egypt, who could have predicted this just a few short weeks ago? We understand that our health can also change very quickly. When I was down in Tennessee a year ago, one of my friends got a call that his wife was sick, and that she needed some tests. He had to leave the lectures last year to go be with her in the hospital for what they thought might have been a case of pneumonia. And yet within a few days and after several tests, doctors diagnosed this relatively young woman with Stage 4 breast cancer. And by the day after Thanksgiving, this man's wife had passed away at the age of 46. We look at the world around us, we look at our own lives, and we know that circumstances can change very quickly.

As we face these challenges, as our faith is tested, where can we go for courage? How can we face the uncertain future with confidence? This morning, I would invite you to study with me a character from the Bible who faced a challenging situation with some amazing courage. I am referring to Joshua as he took on the responsibility of leading the Israelites after the death of Moses, and our text for this morning is found in Joshua 1:1-9 (p. 347).

I know that it is sometimes easy for us to talk about courage, but maybe we are tempted to back off when we are faced with a real challenge. I am reminded of maybe a small dog that will bark up a storm when it is either inside behind the big picture window or maybe safely behind a fence. A little dog like that will always bark at the big dogs, but that little dog may not be so confident out there in the open. And maybe in the same way, it is easy to talk about courage here in this building, but the challenge comes during the week. This morning, then, I would like for us to consider Joshua as an example of someone who was challenged and had the courage to step up to that challenge during a very difficult time in the history of God's people. And as we study, I would like for us to focus our attention on the words of encouragement that God had for Joshua right from the beginning. After forty years of wandering in the wilderness, a new generation of Israelites had come on the scene, and God chose Joshua to take over for Moses. If you will, then, please look with me at Joshua 1:1-9...

¹ Now it came about after the death of Moses the servant of the LORD, that the LORD spoke to Joshua the son of Nun, Moses' servant, saying, ² "Moses My servant is dead; now therefore arise, cross this Jordan, you and all this people, to the land which I am giving to them, to the sons of Israel. ³ "Every place on which the sole of your foot treads, I have given it to you, just as I spoke to Moses. ⁴ "From the wilderness and this Lebanon, even as far as the great river, the river Euphrates, all the land of the Hittites, and as far as the Great Sea toward the setting of the sun will be your territory. ⁵ "No man will be able to stand before you all the days of your life. Just as I have been with Moses, I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you. ⁶ "Be strong and courageous, for you shall give this people possession of the land which I swore to their fathers to give them. ⁷ "Only be strong and very courageous; be careful to do according to all the law which Moses My servant commanded you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, so that you may have success wherever you go. ⁸ "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 success. ⁹ "Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous! Do not tremble or be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go."

As we look back over these nine verses, and as we think about facing our own circumstances with the kind of courage that Joshua had, I would like for us to consider three basic ideas that allowed Joshua to be the kind of leader that God wanted him to be.

I. **And the first basic concept here is that JOSHUA WAS COMMANDED TO MEDITATE ON THE WORD OF GOD.**

And the emphasis comes in verse 8 as God said, ***"This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night."*** What book was God referring to here? He was referring to the inspired book that Moses had just finished writing. We know that during the time Moses led the Israelites, he wrote down what happened. With God's input, Moses wrote down a summary of God's dealings with the human race up to that point in history, from the creation all the way down to his own death. The Book of the Law has five volumes: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. The effort is described just a few chapters earlier in Deuteronomy 31 where Moses is described as finishing the book, giving it to the priests, and ordering that it be placed beside the Ark of the Covenant.

And yet we find here that it was not enough to just have the book in a place of honor in the tabernacle, but we find that Joshua was commanded by God to meditate on the words of God's law. Of course when we hear the word ***"meditate"*** these days, we may tend to think of meditation in terms of the various Eastern religions, the concept of clearing one's mind so that we may think of nothing. In Joshua 1, however, when God tells Joshua to ***"meditate"*** on the law, God uses a word that refers to muttering or speaking something. And so the idea is not that we are to clear our minds of all thoughts, but the idea is that we are to fill our minds with the word of God. The word of God is to be constantly spoken under our breath. We are to repeat it in our minds, speaking it to ourselves again and again, thinking it over, letting it sink in.

We know from experience that our thoughts have a way of changing our behavior, and so the Lord tells Joshua that he is to ***"meditate"*** on the law. He is to think about it constantly. Have you ever had a song stuck in your head? Maybe we just hear someone mention the song, or maybe we hear the song itself on the radio, but the song gets in our mind, and we can't get it out. That is what God is talking about here. The word of God is to

be like that, we are to meditate on it day and night. We are to mutter it under our breath, over and over again, continually. In other words, it is not enough just to read it, but we are to think about it, constantly.

Perhaps we could think about our Bible reading as a little bit like sitting down for a nice meal. When someone has prepared a huge feast for us, do we sit down and shovel it in as fast as we can (sometimes we do), or do we slow down to appreciate it? And yes, there are times when we may need to eat quickly—eating something quickly is better than nothing slowly. But there are other times when we need to take our time to appreciate a meal, to truly taste it as we should. We can say the same thing when it comes to the word of God. Yes, we can sit down and quickly read just a little bit here and there, but there are other times when we need to slow down and let it sink in. Sometimes we just need to enjoy it. We need to slow down to focus on it.

This past Friday afternoon, I posted a link on the church's Facebook page concerning the bobbing that pigeons and chickens do as they walk. The article is by a veterinarian in Ireland, and he summarizes some of the research that has been done over the past 30 years or so. Scientists are not positive, but the leading theory for the bobbing that many birds do as they walk is that they move their heads forward very quickly to focus, and then their bodies catch up. They shoot their head forward to focus on where they're going and to briefly look around for predators. To us, it looks like the head is going back and forth, but it isn't. The head is shooting forward, and the body then catches up to the head. To test this theory, they tried putting a pigeon on a treadmill (that would have been an interesting experiment...can you imagine being given that assignment in grad school?), but on the treadmill, the environment was not moving, and the bobbing stopped—since the room was not moving, there was no reason for shooting the head forward. But under normal circumstances, pigeons (and also chickens and many other birds) will throw their heads forward to focus on where they are going, and then their bodies will catch up: Focus-catch up, focus-catch up, and so on. I bet you're wondering what this has to do with Joshua 1! And the lesson is this: Like those birds, we as God's people also need to focus before we do anything! We as God's people need to focus on where we are going before we make a move. As Christians, we are to focus on God's word, and then allow our lives to catch up, focus on God's word-catch up, focus on God's word-catch up, and so on. We are to spend some time meditating on the word of God.

Maybe we should give ourselves a little test: What did we spend most of our time thinking about over this past week? What was it that dominated our thoughts? Maybe we thought a lot about work or school, and we need to do that, that's part of life. But hopefully we also spent some time meditating on the word of God. Let us throw our heads out there to focus on the word of God, and then let us allow our lives to catch up.

First of all, then, in order to have the kind of courage that Joshua had, we must decide to meditate on the word of God. ***"This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night."***

II. There is a second basic concept in this paragraph of Scripture in Joshua 1, and the idea is that we are not just to meditate on God's word, but WE MUST ALSO DO IT.

Notice what God goes on to say in verse 8. Concerning the Law, God said, ***"...you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it."*** The reason for meditating on it, then, is so that we will be able to do it. The idea is carried over from verse 7, ***"Only be strong and very courageous; be careful to do according to all the law which Moses My servant commanded you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, so that you may have success wherever you go."*** In other words, meditating on the word of God is not just a mental exercise, but it has a purpose. We let it sink in as we study,

“so that [we] may be careful to do according to all that is written in it.” We are not studying just so that we can get a good grade on some kind of test, but we study to change the way we live. We study to the point where it actually means something to us.

In the New Testament, we remember the parable of the wise and foolish builders in Matthew 7:24-27. Jesus said,

²⁴ “Therefore everyone who hears these words of Mine and acts on them, may be compared to a wise man who built his house on the rock. ²⁵ “And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and yet it did not fall, for it had been founded on the rock. ²⁶ “Everyone who hears these words of Mine and does not act on them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. ²⁷ “The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and it fell—and great was its fall.”

Both men heard the word of God, but only one of them did something about it! James tells us in James 1 that if we look at the word of God but do not change the way we are living, we are like a guy who looks in a mirror and then forgets the image before doing anything about it. Reading the Bible and not obeying it, then, is like a guy who wakes up in the morning, looks in the mirror, notices maybe something really gross hanging out of his nose...and then goes to work! The solution, though, is carefully look at God’s word just as we would look in a mirror in the morning, and then we are do something about whatever it is we learn.

Joshua, then, was to meditate on God’s word, but he was also told to do it, to put the word of God into practice. And one other thing while we’re on this point, please notice a special warning in the middle of verse 7: Concerning the Law, God warned Joshua, **“Do not turn from it to the right or to the left.”** And you know, there are two ways that we can deviate from the word of God even today. On one hand, we can loosen God’s law; that is, we can ignore certain parts of it, we can dismiss it. But then on the other hand, we can also go to the other extreme, we can tighten God’s law; that is, we can be stricter than God requires, and this is also a great danger. Joshua, then, was warned, **“Do not turn from it to the right or to the left.”** Do not relax God’s law, and do not add to it. Both extremes are very dangerous. We are to meditate on the word of God, and then we are to do it.

III. There is a third basic concept I’d like for us to consider from Joshua 1, and that is, after we meditate and after we put it into practice, WE ARE ENCOURAGED TO FACE THIS LIFE WITH CONFIDENCE.

Three times in this short paragraph, God tells Joshua to, **“Be strong and courageous.”** Literally, God was telling Joshua to be firm, hard, solid, and strong. God was telling Joshua to be stout, bold, and alert. **“Be strong and courageous.”** It has been said that, “Courage is not the absence of fear, but the presence of faith,” and I believe that would be a true statement. Courage is facing life’s struggles with confidence in spite of our fear. But one thing that really strikes me about this comes in Joshua 1:9 as God says, **“Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous! Do not tremble or be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go.”** Going back up to verse 5, God puts it another way as He says, **“Just as I have been with Moses, I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you.”** Please notice: The reason that Joshua is to be strong and courageous is because the Lord was to be with him. And again, please notice: God did not promise a trouble-free life. God did not promise that Joshua would live to a ripe old age and retire on his own private island. God did not promise that Joshua would never get frustrated. But God said that no matter what happens, **“I will be with you.”**

Does that sound familiar? I'm thinking of the Great Commission in Matthew 28 where Jesus spoke to His disciples for the last time on this earth and said, ***"Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."*** There He was giving them an incredibly difficult mission. He did not say that it would be easy. He did not even say that the apostles would survive the assignment. But the Lord said, ***"I am with you always."***

In a similar way, we will face some situations in our own lives that may just wear us out. We may be facing some health issues, or relationship issues, or job issues, or family issues. God has not promised to keep us from those things, but He has promised that He will be with us in those struggles. And truly, the Lord was with Joshua. Over the coming years, Joshua would lead battles. Joshua would need to struggle and fight. Joshua would have to work hard. But in the end, Joshua succeeded in the mission that God had given to him. If you will, please keep a finger in Joshua 1, and please look with me at the very end of the book of Joshua. Please turn over with me to Joshua 24. Right at the end of this book, after roughly 25 years have gone by, after roughly 30 major battles, after the land has been conquered, we come to Joshua 24:31, we come to a summary of Joshua's life; Joshua 24:31, ***"Israel served the LORD all the days of Joshua and all the days of the elders who survived Joshua, and had known all the deeds of the LORD which He had done for Israel."***

You see, facing battles, and struggles, and discouragement is not a sign that God has let us down, but the fact that we make our way through it is a sign that God is with us! When I first started preaching, I used to deliver a postcard with each hospital visit. Maybe I need to go back and do this again, but the cards had a poem by Annie Johnson Flint,

*God has not promised skies always blue,
Flower-strewn pathways all our lives through;
God has not promised sun without rain,
Joy without sorrow, peace without pain.*

*But God has promised strength for the day,
Rest for the labor, light for the way, grace for the trials,
Help from above, unfailing sympathy, undying love.*

In a similar way, God did not promise Joshua a life of ease, but God told Joshua to ***"Be strong and courageous,"*** and then promised to be with him all the way. Joshua, then, was to face his challenge with confidence.

Conclusion:

Sometime this week, I would encourage all of us to read through the book of Joshua and read about the great leader that he became. There is something rather unusual about Joshua in the Bible, and that is, he is one of only a few men in the Bible who are never criticized. As far as I can tell, we have no record of anything bad that Joshua ever did. I am not saying that he never sinned, but it is still very interesting. He never struck the rock in anger, as Moses had done. He never committed adultery, as David did. He never lost his temper as Peter did. Joshua was not sinless, but it is interesting that there is no blot on his record as far as the Bible is concerned.

Not only that, but when our Lord came to this earth, what did He choose as His name? He took the name Jesus, which is the Greek version of the Hebrew name Joshua. What an honor that must have been for Joshua, to share the name of the coming Messiah!

Some of you might have caught this already, but do you know what kind of tree we're looking at up here? We're looking at the "Joshua Tree." When religious settlers made their way to the American southwest, they found these trees and were impressed with how they were able to stand all alone out there in the desert. They thought that the branches of the tree resembled Joshua lifting his hands to God in prayer. And so they started referring to this particular species as the "Joshua Tree."

This morning, then, as we think about Joshua, I would like for us to be encouraged to follow his example. I know that all of us have our own struggles, we have our own disappointments, we have our own challenges. But when these things happen, when life seems to be falling apart, we can remember one of the great heroes of the Old Testament, and we can be like those trees out there in the desert that so impressed the early pioneers. After all, it is easy to have courage when we are together, when we are assembled together in this small room, but the challenges come when we go home, the challenges come when we go back to school or work tomorrow. We may have a serious illness in our future. We may have a temptation sitting on our desk just waiting for us when we get back to work. But whatever it is, we can decide right now to meditate on the word of God, we can then do it; that is, we can apply what we've read. And then finally (based on this passage from Joshua), we can face the challenges of this life with confidence.

There are some people here this morning who need to make some adjustments. Even as Christians, maybe we realize that we need to have more courage when it comes to telling others about what we believe. But for those who have not yet obeyed the good news, the first step is to believe what you've read in the Bible. We must then make a decision to turn away from sin, and then we must allow ourselves to be briefly dipped in water for the forgiveness of our sins. God already sent His Son as a perfect sacrifice. We are responsible for responding to that sacrifice in faithful, humble obedience, doing whatever it takes to turn our lives back toward God. If you have any questions about what God requires, we would love to study with you sometime this week. But if you have something we need to pray about as a congregation, or if you are ready to obey the gospel right now, you can let us know as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com