

Sunday 6 January 2019.
Dawning of a New Day – The Land is in Sight.
Joshua 1: 1-18.

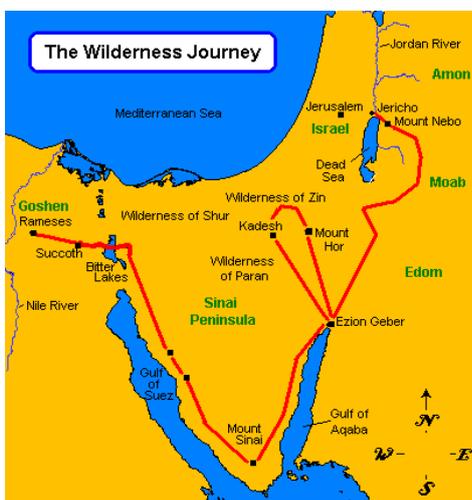
Good morning - and a Happy New Year. I haven't asked Oli if we're looking at Joshua at the start of the year from a 'new beginnings' perspective - but that's possible. In a moment we'll be reading Joshua 1:1-18 and you'll find it on page 216 in the church Bibles. But first - a bit of background.

As I've said before, to properly understand a 'text' in the Bible it helps if you know the 'context' of its setting or you're in danger of missing the point. But the context of what's gone before Joshua chapter one happens to be most of the first five books of the Bible. So here's the drastically scaled down version.

God chose a man called Abraham to start a family, and that family eventually became a special nation to fulfil His purposes on earth. They were without any land to call their own, but God promised them territory. For a long period they lived and multiplied in Egypt, first as guests, and then later as slaves, until God sent them a deliverer called Moses to lead them out of Egypt under His direction, and into a desert wilderness area a little way south of the land He'd promised them. And this deliverance from Egypt happened just about forty years before the start of Joshua Ch.1 which we'll be reading in a minute.

So far so good. But when God tried to lead them into the land He'd promised them, they chickened out. You see the land they were to take over already had tenants - large, strong tenants who they'd need to forcibly dispose. Now please don't ask me to explain God's decision for this forcible takeover. The genocide recorded in Joshua is hard for us to understand today, and over thirty-three centuries later the backlash from it is still with us in the political map of the Middle East. Enough to say that in 2 Chronicles 33 it talks about "the detestable practices of the pagan nations who the LORD had driven from the land ahead of the Israelites". God is judge of *all* nations - including *ours* on the modern world map - and that's all I'm going to say.

But because the Israelites initially rebelled against God's purposes to take over this land, they remained nomads, and they ended up wandering in the wilderness that was only supposed to be a transitory location for them. This happened until all those over twenty who came out of Egypt had died - and it took forty years.



Now please don't take this map of their wilderness journey too literally. It's a representation. You'll find several interpretations on the internet of what it might look like. But we do know where they ended up - in the current country of Jordan just across the river from a city called Jericho, which today is in the disputed West Bank area of modern day Israel.

I did said all had died age twenty and over - but that's not completely true. Two survived - and one was Joshua. That's because he and Caleb were the two 'good spies' who'd said "Yes we can" forty years before, when the others who spied out Canaan, and all the people after them, said, "No we can't".

Just an aside. The name Joshua means "The Lord is Salvation". Joshua was Moses'



assistant, and Moses had changed his name from 'Hoshea' ("he saves") to Joshua ("the Lord is Salvation"). You can read about that in Num. 13:16 - although we don't get told why Moses changed his name. Joshua is a Hebrew word - but guess what it's Greek equivalent is? It's Jesus.

And by now you should have found Joshua Ch.1:1-18 so let's read it.

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 them—to the Israelites. I will give you every place where you set your foot, as I promised Moses. Your territory will extend from the desert to Lebanon, and from the great river, the Euphrates—all the Hittite country—to the Mediterranean Sea in the west. No one will be able to stand against you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you. Be strong and courageous, because you will lead these people to inherit the land I swore to their ancestors to give them.

"Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go. Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful. Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go."

So Joshua ordered the officers of the people: "Go through the camp and tell the people, 'Get your provisions ready. Three days from now you will cross the Jordan here to go in and take possession of the land the Lord your God is giving you for your own.'"

But to the Reubenites, the Gadites and the half-tribe of Manasseh, Joshua said, "Remember the command that Moses the servant of the Lord gave you after he said, 'The Lord your God will give you rest by giving you this land.' Your wives, your children and your livestock may stay in the land that Moses gave you east of the Jordan, but all your fighting men, ready for battle, must cross over ahead of your fellow Israelites. You are to help them until the Lord gives them rest, as he has done for you, and until they too have taken possession of the land the Lord your God is giving them. After that, you may go back and occupy your own land, which Moses the servant of the Lord gave you east of the Jordan toward the sunrise."

Then they answered Joshua, "Whatever you have commanded us we will do, and wherever you send us we will go. Just as we fully obeyed Moses, so we will obey you. Only may the Lord your God be with you as he was with Moses. Whoever rebels against your word and does not obey it, whatever you may command them, will be put to death. Only be strong and courageous!"

When I first came to this church age thirteen I joined a boy's Bible class here that was part of a national movement called 'Covenanters'. The name derives from the Scottish Covenanter movement that at one time in our island's history stood up for faithful adherence to the Bible and its teaching in the face of adversity. The reason I mention it this morning is because that organisation had a sort of theme tune chorus which was "Be thou strong and very courageous" - and it was lifted straight out of this passage and the instruction given to Joshua. But more about that instruction in

a minute.

Moses is dead. God's appointed leader that brought this nation out of their Egyptian captivity is no longer with them. And even though these people had had a love hate relationship with him, they must have been feeling the uncertainty of his absence right now. And this was accentuated by the fact that as a nation they were neither where they ought to be or where they'd been. As I've said, they were near the foot of Mount Nebo, just across the River Jordan from Jericho, and still in today's country of Jordan.

But God appoints Joshua to be Moses' successor. And this wasn't quite out of the blue. He had been Moses official right hand man from way back in the wilderness. And the Bible also gives us a hint about his spirituality when it tells us that on one occasions when Moses left the tent set aside for meeting with God, Joshua stayed behind on his own. People don't usually instantly become God's chosen person for a role - it's built over time, even if they can't see it happening themselves. And it's sometime's only apparent in hindsight.

But I want to start by asking you a question - in fact two questions - but we'll take them one at a time. In the first nine verses we've read we have between three and five promises - depending how you divide them up. I'll give you a moment to re-read the passage - and then ask you to tell me what they are. I've put the passage is up on the screen for those of you not using your own Bibles. And if the words on the screen are slightly different to the church Bibles, that's because the church Bibles are the 1984 version which has been slight revised due to later scholarship. After all, the Bible wasn't written in English. So a moment to think then ...

So tell me - what promises can you see in verses 1 to 9?

^{v.3} I will give you every place where you set your foot, as I promised Moses.

^{v.5} No one will be able to stand against you all the days of your life.

As I was with Moses, so I will be with you;

I will never leave you nor forsake you.

^{v.9} Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go."

Now if you were Joshua having just taking over from Moses, and without Moses wisdom and insight and 'hotline to God' to back you up, would you be encouraged by that? I think I would be.

Although... there is an indication in this passage that he wasn't as confident in his role even with these promises as he might have been. Because right at the end of the passage those he's leading repeat to him God's words about being strong and courageous. But I tell you what - I'd rather follow someone humble before a problem than someone self-confident that they could breeze through it. They're people who know they need to rely on God for their help.

But I said I had two questions I wanted to ask you. As well as these promises in verse 1 to 9 - there are some conditions. Things that both Joshua and the people need to observe for the promises to work to enable them to prosper and be successful. So re-read the passage and tell me what they are - and I'll again give you a moment or so to do it ...

So - what can you see? In fact - it's all of verses 7 & 8

"Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go. Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it."

Sometimes we really do need to be 'strong and courageous' in the face of temptation to do the wrong thing. Just a short way further into this book we'll come across a man called Achan who needed to heed God's instruction but didn't. But that's for another day. So where do we find out what we should, and should not, be doing? Sadly much of the cultural norms of our day aren't taken from the Bible - and when they are many people don't like it. Things that historically came into our way of life from the Bible have been ditched in recent years in favour of modern expediencies. So for instance we even have TV adverts promoting revenge and making it look acceptable. God's answer is to do what this passage advises - go back to God's instructions and live by them. Not just *know* them. Learning them is the easy bit for most of us. Living by them is what the Bible - from beginning to end - asks of us.



**We are saved by GRACE
NOT by what we do!**

But I do need to put up a spiritual health warning at this point. Because it's so so easy to slip into the trap of seeking to do all the right things - and *then* thinking that by doing that we are earning our eternal relationship with God. Which means that a few key verses that I think that ever Christian should know by heart are Ephesians 2:8-10. For it is by *grace* you have been saved, through faith—and this *is not from yourselves*, it is the gift of God— *not by works*, so that no one can boast. For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to *do good works*, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

In fact if you want to set yourself a bit of homework, and you're up for it, committing Ephesians 2:1-10 to memory will do you no harm at all. *In fact* - that is absolutely in line with God's instruction in this passage - commit it to mind - and meditate on it.

Some friends of mine in my retired railway colleagues' association are old enough to have done some military service. That was a long time ago - but still today they can recite to you without hesitation their service number - "*12345678 sir!*" It was their identity - and woe betide them if they forgot it. These verses in Ephesians are *our* identity if we have personally accepted Jesus Christ's salvation this morning. And woe betide *us* if we forget that. And if you want to see how seriously Paul took it, read his letter to the Galatians and feel the impact of the verbal chastising he gave them for seeking an alternative to Jesus' death on the cross as the only way to put them right with God.

So verses 1 to 9 of this chapter do two things. They first of all set the scene for us - and we've seen that from the very first few words. But they are also God's commissioning of Joshua for the next phase of his life. "Moses my servant is dead. Now then, you..." And the rest of this book is actually a record of how Joshua and

this fledgling nation applied themselves to living out the purposes God has given them in these few verses. Because it didn't just happen - they had to do it - in obedience - every step of the way.

So verse 10 onwards in this chapter is an initial administrative application of what Joshua has been instructed to do. And since it also alludes to a bit of previous history, I want to briefly pick up on that. The territory God gave them (but which most of them hadn't yet possessed) had been carefully allocated to each of the twelve tribes of Israel under Moses leadership, like so:-

Two and a half of the tribe's territory was on the east side of the River Jordan (the side they were on now) and the rest was yet to be possessed. And you'll find the record of this part of the allocation clearly spelt out in Deuteronomy Ch.3 verses 18-20.

So actually you could say that two and a half of the tribes could have gone and settled down right away. But Moses also gave them instruction to support the rest of the Israelites until they also had achieved their inheritance as they took over the land to the West of the river. And Joshua here is merely reminding them of that instruction given to them by Moses.

And just as previously they'd accepted Moses commands, so now they accepted Joshua's. He's just crossed his first hurdle as leader.



But what I want to draw out of the second half of this chapter for our edification is - what can we learn from their attitude that will inform and encourage us as we live the life God calls us to in 21st century England?

Well to start with - integrity. They'd agreed with what Moses had said, and now, instead of grumbling that they wanted out as their plots were already available - they took on this indeterminate period of work for others. So how does our integrity hold up - not just when all's going well - but when things start to get tough and we'd rather be somewhere else?

Psalm 15:4 has an interesting line in it. It usually comes to mind when I've agreed to do something and find it clashes with something else I'd rather be doing. It talks about a person "who keeps an oath even when it hurts, and does not change their mind". For oath, read promise. That's integrity - and it's in keeping with the attitude and actions of the men of these two and a half tribes. And of course - just like for anyone going off to war - there was no guarantee they were all coming home. And in fact some Israelites died fairly soon while attacking Ai - but that's also for another day.

But how do we apply this today to our own Christian lives as an active (hopefully so) member of the body of Christ, the Church? Of course we can't replicate the application faced by them, but their attitude of living in support of others, and, if you like, 'crossing our Jordan' into some territory that will actively support others, certainly can. Well... let me give you just one suggestion that's a bit close to my

heart.

We live in a relatively safe environment where being a Christian isn't challenged too much for most of us - and even when it is we have some support we can fall back on and a reasonable, even legal, expectation of 'fairness'. Not so for many of our brothers and sisters in other parts of the world who live under oppressive regimes - many living in majority non-Christian, and often anti-Christian, countries. So how do we - metaphorically - "cross the river" from our established reasonably safe environment to join with them and help them as they seek to gain their inheritance?

Well first of all - we can get to know their territory. Twice at the border of their hostile land the Israelites sent in spies to find out the facts about what was ahead of them. And in today's information culture we are blessed with not needing to live in the dark about the situations the Church faces 'out there'.



This is a map produced by one organisation working in to support the persecuted church and shows fifty places in the world where the church is facing harm. I know of four major organisations working to help our brothers and sisters in their distress. This map was produced by Open Doors - and we've had a speaker here at SRCF from Release International fairly recently, and we've also had past contact with Barnabas Fund. These all produce prayer diaries with a wide variety of day by day items to pray for.

And that's something else we can do. Pray for the persecuted church. And

proper pray is definitely work. Prayer is a mystery. Why God asks us to pray for issues He knows about already, and why some prayers are answered, sometimes spectacularly, and some seem to get lost in transmission, I don't know. But we *are* expected to pray, and it *is* something *all* Christians can do.

Something else some of us might be better equipped to do - is to give financial support. Now if you're like me, you'll regularly get 'begging letters' from charities falling on your doormat - secular as well as Christian. And not all will even have your name on them, because the Royal Mail gets in on the act, as does inserts in some publications, and on a variety of different needs.

Now we won't all identify with the same things, and not all of us will have the money anyway to give to many situations that we'd like to support. But I *do hope* that we read these appeals with one ear cocked towards heaven, and don't shut out all need. And as far as the persecuted church is concerned, everything from clothes for their children to legal representation and medical help for the injured comes from our giving. And in some countries suffering natural disasters, the majority culture sometimes excludes Christians from access to support, so our contributions also put meals on tables in dire circumstances. So do what you can do - and again - tap into the information produced by the aforesaid organisations for the methods to do that.

Something else you might be able to do, is write. Over the years I've written to a



number of London based embassies of countries where Christians were being persecuted or marginalised. I've usually checked to see when they signed the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (which most of them had) and then quoted back to them Article 18 about freedom of religion. I never got a reply from any of them, but then I wasn't expecting one. It was enough to know that they knew someone out there knew what was happening and cared enough to get in touch about it. That - and a prayer that it would make a difference - was enough. I also sometimes wrote to my MP with a request to forward a concern to the then Foreign Secretary. That did get a reply. They have to reply if they're your MP. Again, it tells them someone knows and someone cares. What more effect it had I don't know, but I'm reminded of some words attributed to Edmund Burke; "The only thing necessary for evil to triumph is for good men (or women) to do nothing".

Or you could support one of the organisations in some practical way if you have the time, the energy, and wanted to. Offering to be a local representative for them comes to mind as possibly the easiest. Or if they have an office close enough to travel to, you could possibly offer to go and stuff envelopes for their mail-shots. It is doable. I did that for a short period for Christian Aid for their London Team based near Liverpool Street station many years ago. But it's whatever is the right thing for you.

But of course for you - it might a totally different Jordan you need to cross in support of your brothers and sisters - be that in this country or abroad. Maybe taking the battle for social justice to some authority without a heart on behalf of someone being trampled by a system weighed against them. Or just simply (I say simply, but it isn't) taking on the commitment of visiting someone regularly who needs your care. Or here - in this church - on the battlefield of our work in this community were fewer and fewer of us are trying to cover all our activities - to become committed to help in some way if you aren't already involved. Whatever it is - all you need to do is to sincerely desire to be available, not to us, but to God, and He'll take you at your word. After all, He's our Joshua. And I've already told you - the name 'Joshua' in Greek... is Jesus.

Someone said many centuries ago, "The road to hell is paved with good intentions". Well... for us as who are Christians - not to hell - but perhaps to ineffectiveness. So please - do *yourself* a favour - don't now just metaphorically turn over and go to sleep. Remember Ephesians 2:10 - "we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to *do good works*, which God prepared in advance for us to do". And if you *really* have no idea what you can do, you could take note of something I recall hearing said in the past. Look and see where God's working... then join in. Because we each only have one life - and I'm sure we don't want the commentary on it to be at the end of the day - could so easily have done better - do we?

And I think that is a good question for the beginning of a new year.

Granville Richards