

Conquering Through Courage and Faith:

The life and legacy of Joshua

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Joshua 18:1-21:45

God's provisions

Thesis: The will of God never leads where his grace cannot sustain.

Goal: Follow God into his future for you, trusting his provision.

I have read that a buzzard can be trapped in a pen which is open at the top, so long as its dimensions are no more than six to eight feet long. The bird always begins its flight with a run of ten to twelve feet. Without such space, it will not even attempt to fly, though its pen has no roof to keep it from the skies. Similarly, a bumblebee, if dropped into an open glass jar, will remain trapped until it dies. It will fly into the sides of the jar, but will never attempt to escape from its top.

It is easy to struggle with our problems, frustrations, and needs, never realizing that our answer is just above us. God's purpose for our lives is always greater than we can imagine it to be.

Saul of Tarsus used his theological training and cultural education to achieve significance within Phariseism. God used them to write half of the New Testament and take Christ across the known world. Peter used his gifts of courage and leadership to create a successful fishing enterprise. God used them to lead his church into all the world (Acts 17:6). Matthew used his literary talents and prodigious memory to record tax accounts. God used them to record the Sermon on the Mount.

So it was with the ancient Israelites. Their fondest hope was that they might have a land of their own. But God's plan was far greater. He intended to make of them a people which would endure in that land for some 15 centuries, so he could bring through them the Messiah who would bring salvation to the entire human race. And so God provided for the needs they knew they faced, and for those they did not even know existed. He still does the same for all of us who will follow him by faith today.

Where is God calling you to take a step which transcends sight? To risk, courage, or boldness? Are you facing a trial which seems beyond your strength? Temptation transcending your power to resist? A decision which you cannot find the will to make?

Where is God calling you to trust in him alone? If you don't sense such a calling in your heart, get alone with your Father until you do. He never leads his children further into his purpose than we can see with our eyes. When we come to that place which calls us to risk, remember that the will of God never leads where his grace cannot sustain. Step onto his promises, and you will find them ever faithful.

We will watch as God leads the first Joshua to provide for the needs of his people. Then we will watch the second Joshua, the Lord Jesus, as he applies such provision to those who follow him in New Testament faith today. This week is the first Sunday of Advent and the week of hope; it is appropriate that we learn to trust the provisions of our loving Father, new each day of the year.

Claim his provision for your material needs (chs. 18-19)

Each tribe needed land upon which to live. Theirs was an agrarian society, where land was life. And so the geographical location of the tribes would largely determine their future prosperity. Discord about such a significant decision could tear apart their union. Wars over such issues are still fought today.

How would each tribe have what it needed? If the smaller tribes like Benjamin received the largest parts of the land, the larger tribes like Manasseh or Judah could starve. The current redistricting battle in the Texas Legislature shows that such issues have never lost their relevance. How would the nation avoid such infighting and potential disaster?

God's solution through Joshua was simple: they would "cast lots" (18:10). The land-apportioning ceremony would take place at Shiloh, because it was centrally located so representatives from every tribe could attend the event. This was the location where the Lord intended his tabernacle to stand (see Deuteronomy 12:14); later Jeremiah quoted the Lord as saying that Shiloh was "where I set my name at the first" (7:12).

The tribes trusted the Lord to know and meet their physical needs. And the result was a land distribution which would stand as long as the nation survived.

In such faith, the people followed their leader. Joshua's tribe gave him the city he asked for: Timnath Serah in the hill country, where "he built up the town and settled there" (19:50). As the nation's leader, general, and hero, he had every right to choose his land first. He could have chosen the most valuable possession in the entire region. Instead, he took what was left (v. 49). And here he was buried (24:30).

Joshua knew the truth Jesus later taught his followers: "Do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own" (Matthew 6.31-34). The will of God never leads where the grace of God cannot sustain.

A friend sent me this reading, which I have found worth repeated reading:

*There are two days in every week about which we should not worry,
two days which should be kept free from fear and apprehension.*

*One of these days is Yesterday with all its mistakes and cares,
its faults and blunders, its aches and pains.*

*Yesterday has passed forever beyond our control.
All the money in the world cannot bring back Yesterday.*

*We cannot undo a single act we performed;
we cannot erase a single word we said.*

Yesterday is gone forever.

*The other day we should not worry about is Tomorrow
with all its possible adversities, its burdens, its large promise,
and its poor performance.
Tomorrow is also beyond our immediate control.*

*Tomorrow's sun will rise, either in splendor behind a mask of clouds,
but it will rise. Until it does, we have no stake in Tomorrow,
for it is yet to be born.*

This leaves only one day.

*Any person can fight the battle of just one day.
It is when you and I add the burdens of those two awful eternities,
Yesterday and Tomorrow, that we break down.*

*It is not the experience of Today that drives a person mad,
it is the remorse or bitterness of something which happened Yesterday
and the dread of what Tomorrow may bring.*

Let us, therefore, live but one day at a time.

No matter our current circumstances, there is hope in the God who transcends them and knows our every need.

Choose refuge over revenge (ch. 20)

If the nation was to survive, it would have to solve not only its geographical issues but also its political and relational problems. Most urgent was the issue of the "avenger of blood" (v. 1).

In ancient Israel, one who killed another was himself to be killed (Genesis 9:5-6; Leviticus 24:17). Such regulation served to prevent murder. But it also limited retribution to the guilty party; in other cultures, it was common for the family of the one killed to seek revenge against the entire family or tribe of the murderer. And so the

closest kinsman to the person killed was charged with responsibility for revenge and justice (Numbers 35:16-21).

However, on occasion a person would be killed "accidentally" (the Hebrew word means to sin ignorantly or inadvertently) and "unintentionally" ("without knowledge" in the Hebrew, not knowing that he had done so) (Joshua 20:3; cf. Exodus 21:12-14). (Numbers 35:22-24 taught the Jews how to distinguish "innocent" death from murder.) Then the innocent death would lead to another innocent death. Blood feuds would perpetuate, and could destroy the tribe and even the nation.

God's solution was to create cities of "refuge" (the Hebrew word means "to draw together," to give asylum or sanctuary). This had been his plan with Moses (Numbers 35:25-28), now to be enacted under Joshua.

Three cities were so designated: one in the north, one in the central area, and one to the south. Each location was rich with spiritual history and significance. First was "Kedesh" in the northern country of Galilee (the name means "consecration," so that they "consecrated the city of consecration"). Next was Shechem, where God had earlier appeared to Abraham and offered this land (Genesis 12:6-7), and Joshua had renewed the covenant of the nation with God at Mount Ebal (8:30-35). Third was Hebron, where Abraham and Sarah were buried (Genesis 23:2), along with Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Leah (Genesis 49:29-32). Three towns were also designated among the tribes living east of the Jordan (20:8).

Note that each was a city where the Levites were later assigned responsibility and residency (Joshua 21:13, 21, 32; 27, 36, 38). In this way the Lord provided not only a physical location of refuge, but also spiritual influence and opportunity for worship.

God has always known that revenge leads only to further revenge. I think it was Frederick Buechner who first pointed out the fact that an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth is a rapid way to a sightless, toothless world. God's answer is always justice combined with grace, law tempered by love. He seeks always the redemption of the soul, no matter the sin.

Jesus made this principle of just love even more spiritual and internal: we must not only refuse murder, we must reject anger and bitterness as well (Matthew 5:21-27). He knew that sins of the heart become sins of the hand. And he taught us to love and pray for those who persecute us (Matthew 5:43-48), ending the cycle of revenge before it can begin. The "cities of refuge" created by Joshua are now to exist in our hearts.

Dr. Lewis Smedes wrote the best book I know on the subject of forgiveness. Its title, *Forgive and Forget: healing the hurts we don't deserve*, promises hope every hurting heart needs. His central thesis is simple: biblical forgiveness is not to excuse the behavior which hurt us, pretend the pain doesn't exist, or forget the hurt happened. Biblical forgiveness is pardon—choosing not to punish the guilty party. When a

governor pardons a convicted criminal, he or she does not pretend the crime did not occur. Rather, the governor chooses not to bring the punishment allowed by law.¹

In the same way, when we follow the teachings of the first and second Joshua, we end the cycle of vengeance. We choose not to punish. And so our pain begins to heal. In the midst of relational suffering, there is hope in the One who loves every soul and heals every heart.

Answer his call to spiritual service (ch. 21)

In this study we have discovered God's answers to the nation's need for physical and relational provision. Now we watch as he provides the spiritual leadership and nurture which will sustain the tribes for the rest of their history in the land. His use of the tribe of Levi proves that God indeed "hits straight licks with crooked sticks."

Levi and his brother Simeon first came to prominence in Israel's history in a most disturbing way. In avenging Shechem's rape of their sister, Dinah, they attacked and killed every male among Shechem's people, and plundered their houses and families. Jacob reproved them from "making me a stench to the Canaanites and Perizzites, the people living in this land" (Genesis 34:30). For this sin, Jacob later pronounced their fate: "I will scatter them in Jacob and disperse them in Israel" (Genesis 49:7).

However, when Israel reverted to idolatry and sin while Moses and Joshua met with God at Mt. Sinai, only the Levites rallied to the Lord and Moses (Exodus 32:26). They followed Moses' command, killing three thousand of the people that day (v. 28). Moses responded to their faithfulness with this promise: "You have been set apart to the Lord today, for you were against your own sons and brothers, and he has blessed you this day" (v. 29).

As a result, God turned Jacob's curse against the Levites into their blessing. They would indeed have no single part of the land, but would be dispersed throughout the nation as God's special and spiritual leaders: "The priests, who are Levites—indeed the whole tribe of Levi—are to have no allotment or inheritance with Israel. They shall live on the offerings made to the Lord by fire, for that is their inheritance. They shall have no inheritance among their brothers; the Lord is their inheritance, as he promised them" (Deuteronomy 18:1-2).

Now Joshua designated the specific cities and places where the Levites would live among the people. Those in the tribe of Levi who served as priests would live in the south (21:4-5). Neither Joshua nor these Levites could know that this was the place where the Temple would later be built, and their Temple service required. But God knew their future significance and ministry, centuries before they would learn it fully.

Other Levites kept the tabernacle, its furnishings, and its procedures. They lived in the 48 cities assigned to them, scattered throughout the nation. They studied and taught God's word (Deuteronomy 13:9-13) and filled other roles which required literacy, such as

physical and medical diagnosis and care (Leviticus 13:1-14). They were used by God to bring spiritual nurture and leadership to the nation, all across the land given to Israel.

Now you and I are God's levitical servants, charged with the same privilege and responsibility of spiritual leadership and nurture. We who follow Jesus are now "a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Peter 2:9). We are now "all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ" (Galatians 3:26-27). With this result: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (vs. 28-29).

According to the second Joshua, we are the salt of the earth and the light of the world (Matthew 5:13-16). It is our responsibility to bring his preserving, purifying salt and darkness-defeating light to the nation trusted to our care. What the Levites were to Israel, we are to Dallas and America. Each one of us.

As God provided Levites for Israel, so he provided his word and sustenance for Levites. Know that you are not called to the ministry of the word without the help of its Minister. Your words are to come from his word, your strength from his Spirit, your wisdom from his Son. You are Levite to your class and community, but only as the representative of the God of Levi and Israel. We are ambassadors for Christ (2 Corinthians 5:20), not responsible for leading the "nation" we serve, but only for representing the One who has given this charge to us.

A group of botanists hiking in a remote part of the Andes Mountains came upon a rare and valuable specimen. Unfortunately, it was growing on the side of a steep and dangerous cliff. The botanists were afraid to climb down, so they called one of the nearby village boys over and offered him a large sum of money if he would go after the flower.

The young boy stared over the cliff. The money they offered was enticing, but he was afraid. Then an idea crossed his mind and face. He told the botanists to wait, and ran into his village. He returned a few minutes later, his hand in that of a much older man. The boy ran to the edge of the cliff and told the botanists, "I'll go over the side now, so long as my father holds the rope."

You and I live in a community in desperate need of spiritual hope. Your Father will hold the rope, if you will climb over the cliff of ministry this week.

Conclusion

In this study, we have watched God meet every need his people faced. He divided their land equitably and peacefully; he provided a system of regional government and courts

which would answer their greatest political and relational needs; and he distributed the Levites throughout the nation to lead his people to spiritual health and maturity.

Joshua 21:43-45 sums up God's provision, and closes with a fact worth claiming today: "Not one of all the Lord's good promises to the house of Israel failed; every one was fulfilled" (v. 45). God kept his promises; he keeps them still.

The second Joshua closed his most famous sermon with a similar promise: the life built on obedience to God's word will stand firm, no matter how strong the storms of life which batter its walls (Matthew 7:24-25). But no other foundation will suffice—all else is sand, and will lead to destruction (vs. 26-27). The promises of God are our only sure and certain provision for the challenges which stand between us and spiritual victory.

What obstacles stand between you and complete obedience to God's call on your life and ministry? What step of risky faith is he asking you to take? Find a promise within the word of God for your need. Stand on it. And it will stand under you. This is the promise and the hope of God.

Such hope is vital to life itself. When Allied soldiers liberated the Holocaust camps, they found thousands of orphaned and starving children. Each child was given a safe place to live, food to eat, clothes to wear and beds in which to sleep. But many still could not sleep through the night. They spent the evening hours restless and afraid.

Finally a psychologist hit on the answer. He instructed that each child was to be given a slice of bread to take to bed. Not to eat—just to hold. Hope that there would be food on the morrow. And the children slept well.

Vaclav Havel once said, "I am not an optimist because I am not sure that everything ends well. Nor am I a pessimist because I am not sure that everything ends badly. I just carry hope in my heart. Hope is a feeling that life and work have meaning. You either have it or you don't, regardless of the state of the world around you. Life without hope is an empty, boring, and useless life. I cannot imagine that I could strive for something if I did not carry hope in me. I am thankful to God for this gift. It is as big a gift as life itself."²

The God of hope came at Advent to bring this gift to us all. Have you opened yours this week?

¹ Lewis Smedes, *Forgive and Forget: Healing The Hurts We Don't Deserve* (New York: HarperCollins, 1984).

² Quoted in *Context* (February 15, 1992) 1.