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lesson 1

Courage in the Midst of Change

MAIN IDEA

God's presence provides us courage in the midst of change.

QUESTION TO EXPLORE

How can we find and demonstrate courage in the midst of change?

TEACHING AIM

To lead adults to trust God's presence and his word as they experience change



JOSHUA
A New Nation Comes Home

Bible Comments

Understanding the Context

Change is difficult. That is one reason the core message of Joshua 1 is highly relevant to us today.

Three times the Lord told Joshua, “Be strong and courageous.”¹ At the chapter’s conclusion, the people repeated the same encouragement and challenge to Joshua.

The Book of Joshua begins as a continuation of the Deuteronomy narrative. The death of Moses transferred the responsibility for leading Israel to Joshua. God had commissioned him for the role (Deut. 31:14–23). There, the Lord also admonished Joshua to “Be strong and courageous.” Joshua could do so because the Lord promised, “I will be with you,” (Deut. 31:23).

Entering the Promised Land could have been easier (and quicker.) However, Israel’s sin and fear kept them from possessing the land God had promised. Instead, they wandered forty years in the wilderness.

Perhaps members of our Bible study classes are afraid of something. In the United States, we do not typically face persecution or the threat of death for our faith; however, there likely are members of our groups who are facing difficulties.

As Christ followers, we must also overcome the fear of sharing the gospel. God offered his promise and encouragement to Joshua. He does so for us as well. God promises. We can trust him. Then, we must act.

Before moving into the interpretation, we would do well to consider how the people in Joshua’s day must have felt. They knew the stories. Their parents had died. The only leader they had known was Moses, though they also knew Joshua as the aide to Moses. They were going into a new land. They would face the obstacles they had heard about from the original spies’ report (Numbers 13:1–33). Still, with God’s presence and Joshua’s leadership, they were ready to go.

Interpreting the Scriptures

The Time Had Come (1:1–4)

1:1. The death of Moses introduced a momentous change. Moses was “the servant of the Lord,” a title of great honor. It signified a unique relationship between God and Moses. Joshua would receive the same title—but not until his death (Josh. 24:29). He had been with Moses at significant turns in Israel’s history in the wilderness (Exodus 32:15–18; 33:11; Num. 11:28; 13:16). However, while Moses was “the servant of the Lord,” Joshua was “Moses’ servant,” (assistant, NRSV²).

That Joshua did not initially receive the same title designation as Moses may indicate he had yet to prove himself. However, Joshua acquitted himself well as a servant of the Lord. At the end of his life, he spoke some of the most memorable words in the Bible. “But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD” (Josh. 24:15).

1:2–4. A man who before retirement worked for the Baptist state convention in Missouri once said at a conference, “Sometimes you cannot sit around and wait for something to happen. Sometimes, you have to make it happen.” After the years in Egypt, and forty years wandering, it was time for Israel to “make it happen.” These verses give the scope of the task given to Joshua and the people of Israel. They were to cross the Jordan and take possession of the Promised Land.

They would do so under Joshua’s leadership. The Jordan was not huge, but rivers are obstacles, and the number of people to cross was large. Plus, the Jordan was at flood stage (3:15).

The land they were to conquer was vast and already populated with fortified cities and armies. However, God gave the land to them in his promises to Moses (Deut. 11:24–25; 34:1–4), and to Abram (Genesis 12:7).

Find Courage in the Promise of God (1:5–11)

1:5. God’s promise to Joshua was the foundation for courage—it is for all believers. The concluding words of Jesus in the Great Commission (Matthew

28:16–20) offered the same promise, “I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” He is always faithful to this promise.

1:6–7. There were corresponding responsibilities for Joshua. God outlined those obligations in two ways.

First, Joshua was instructed to be “strong and courageous.” He could do so because the Lord was with him. Some believers in our Bible study group know the Lord is with them, yet they are still afraid. We can be inspired by remembering that courage is not the absence of fear. A courageous person can be afraid, but chooses to do something anyway because it is the right thing to do.

Joshua was the leader. That leadership role put him in front during the battle—and in the bull’s-eye. Regardless of how he “felt,” he chose to do what God led him to do.

Second, God instructed Joshua to obey the law given to Moses. It was important to know that law and not veer from it.

Bible study is not simply gaining information. Bible study that does not provoke appropriate changes in behavior, attitude, and actions is of little value. Unfortunately, too often people substitute “hearing the word,” for “doing the word” (James 1:22–27). God speaks to us through his written word. After hearing that word, how should we respond? Joshua responded by obeying the word with courage and with faith in the One who would be with him.

1:8–9. To meditate on the law (God’s word) moves us a step beyond simply learning the law. It means “soaking” in it. This “soak” enabled Joshua to provide wise and prudent leadership for the people of Israel. God would make their way prosperous when obedience to him was present. That did not mean material wealth. It meant success in the endeavors before them.

Courage in the Preparation (1:10–11)

1:10–11. Organization, preparation, and a plan of action were necessary for such a challenging endeavor. The “officers” were aides to Joshua. Under his leadership, they shared the responsibilities for directing the move into and

through the new land. Their failure or refusal to fulfill their responsibilities would have created huge problems. The land was already theirs by the promise of God, but the people would still need to eat. Practical preparation would help ease the anxiety surrounding the conquest, and meet the needs of the people.

The “three days” may have meant, “We will start within three days.” However, notice the significance of “three days” as mentioned throughout the Bible.

Courage in the Commitment (1:12–15)

1:12–13. Numbers 32 records the agreement between Moses and the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and the half-tribe of Manasseh. Moses permitted those tribes to settle on the fertile, east side of the Jordan. In return, they would join the other tribes in conquering the land west of the river.

1:14–15. Those tribes promised they would lead the way, perhaps to demonstrate their courage and commitment (Num. 32:17). They reaffirmed their commitment here. The three tribes would only prosper if all Israel succeeded. They carried through on their promise to Moses.

We admire those who “keep their word.” Seeing commitments through to the end encourages others. However, keeping commitments is a learned behavior. Israel had seen Moses and now would see Joshua honor commitments.

Courage in the Confession (1:16–18)

1:16–17. It is unclear whether verses 16–18 contain the response of the three tribes or all twelve. Scholars are divided. Most likely, it was the promise of the collective twelve tribes.

Those strong promises would surely have emboldened Joshua as their leader. Unfortunately, Israel had not always obeyed Moses. And they would not always obey Joshua or God.

Still, there was collective courage in their confession of confidence and commitment to Joshua, and by extension to God. They saw courage in their leader, so they were willing to follow him.

1:17b–18. The people also seemed to offer a caveat in their confession. First, they wanted to know the Lord was with Joshua as he was with Moses. Second, in admonishing Joshua to be strong and courageous, they offered their encouragement to him. Their encouragement might have also contained a veiled threat.

Their conditions were entirely appropriate. A recurring complaint in the Old Testament is voiced against defective prophets and priests. If Joshua heeded the commands God gave him, the people who confessed their confidence in him would follow. If he failed, they would too.

In verse 18, the people recognized the serious nature of their task. It was a huge endeavor that could not succeed with a half-hearted effort. This is no less true today as we consider our responsibility to extend the kingdom of God. Like Joshua and Israel, we can face the future with courage, knowing the Lord is with us as we do.

Focusing on the Meaning

Why do Christians in our country need courage? Although we do not experience harsh persecution for our faith, as do Christians in some parts of the world, religious freedom is under attack in the United States. We need the courage to confront cultural challenges with the truth of the gospel—and to do so with humility and love. And we need the courage to share the gospel with others.

We also face challenges regarding changes in the way we do church—and in the interests of our congregations. Some want more change; others resist it. Often, people only embrace the changes that appeal to them.

Change is constant, and it can produce fear. We need courage to prepare for change and grace to walk through it. We need courage to demonstrate our faith in Jesus by our words and our deeds. When we act courageously, we demonstrate faith.

Like Joshua and Israel, being courageous is not enough. Actions must follow. We have the word of God as our guidebook. Like Joshua, we must meditate on that word, soak in it, so we recognize the presence and guidance of God. We can have courage because we know him.

Our advantage is that Christ lives in his followers through his Holy Spirit. Because he will never leave us, we will never face the challenges of change alone. When we have Christ, we can have courage. Choose to live with courageous confidence in him!

Teaching Plans

DISCOVERY PLAN

Connect with Life

1. Note that major life changes often increase a person's stress level. In 1967, two psychiatrists conducted a research project that evaluated the impact different life changes made on the health of 5,000 medical patients. Drs. Thomas Holmes and Richard Rahe used data from this study to develop a table of stress factors, called Life Change Units. They assigned points out of a maximum of 100 to indicate the amount of stress a person might expect from each event.³
2. Display the following excerpt from the Holmes and Rahe stress factor chart. (A copy of this chart is available in "Teacher Resource Items" for this study at www.baptistwaypress.org). Ask class members to raise their hands if they have experienced any of the life events identified on the chart. Ask those who raised their hands if the chart accurately identifies the stress level associated with those life changes. Encourage volunteers to share how they coped with these stressful events.

Death of a Spouse	100 points
Death of a Close Family Member	63
Personal Injury or Illness	53
Loss of a job	47
Retirement	45
Change in Financial State	38
Death of a Close Friend	37
Change in Work Responsibilities	29
Change in Living Conditions	25
Revision of Personal Habits	24
Change in Residence	20
Change in Eating Habits	15
Minor Infractions of the Law	11

3. Transition into Bible study by asking, *Which life changes identified on the chart might have impacted the Israelites as they prepared to enter the Promised Land? Which stress factors might Joshua have experienced personally?* Explain that this study will reveal how God gave Joshua the help he needed to cope with the changes happening in his life.

Guide Bible Study

4. Direct the class to listen as you read Joshua 1:1–9 aloud. Ask class members to raise their hands whenever they hear a reference to a life change that corresponds to one of those listed in the table of stress factors. Enlist a volunteer to record the changes on a whiteboard or poster paper (Moses died; instructed to cross the Jordan and move to a new country; lead the people—new job/increased responsibility, and so forth).
5. Review the life changes recorded from the passage. Ask the class, *How much stress might each of those changes have generated for Joshua? How could Joshua maintain effectiveness as a leader while dealing with such high levels of stress?*
6. As you read verses 1–9 aloud once more, instruct class members to listen for God’s promises. Ask, *How might individual promises impact each of the life changes recorded on the board or paper?* Discuss how the promises would help Joshua carry out God’s commands.
7. Read aloud verses 10–15. Encourage the class to listen for phrases Joshua used that would help calm and reassure the people.
8. Read aloud verses 16–18. Discuss how Joshua’s confidence in God might transfer to those he led. Ask, *How could the people’s response be seen as an indicator of their trust in God and Joshua as God’s designated leader?*

Encourage Application

9. Refer to verses 1–9, and ask, *Which of God’s promises to Joshua might be applied to a Christian’s life today?* Direct members to suggest life situations that produce stress similar to what Joshua faced.

10. Read aloud and discuss questions two through five in the *Study Guide*. Ask volunteers to share situations they have faced that challenged their trust in God. For those who are willing to share, ask, *How did God strengthen and encourage you during those times?*
11. Say, *If you know someone who is experiencing difficult life changes, please raise your hand.* Without asking for identity disclosures, lead the group in a closing prayer for those individuals. Ask God to strengthen and encourage all class members so that lives will exemplify trust in God's faithfulness.

DISCUSSION PLAN

Connect with Life

1. Divide the class into small groups (smaller classes may work together as one group). Provide each group with a stack of index cards or paper slips. On each card, ask groups to list one life change that might lead to anxiety or stress (divorce, loss of job, moving to a different state, injury or illness, and so forth). Next, ask groups to arrange the cards in descending rank from greatest to lesser levels of stress caused by each change.
2. Ask groups to begin with their first card and discuss how each life change they identified affects the following areas: relationships, self-identity, peace of mind, trust in others, faith in God.
3. Encourage groups to discuss how a Christ-centered perspective can influence our attitudes and reactions during difficult life changes. Transition into Bible study by noting that Joshua was able to cope with a daunting and difficult task by keeping his focus on God and relying on God's guidance and strength.

Guide Bible Study

4. Direct the class to Joshua 1. Instruct small groups to read the first nine verses of the chapter and identify the specific commands God gave to Joshua.

5. Ask small groups to identify the promises God gave to Joshua in verses 1–9. Instruct the groups to discuss: 1) how individual promises might impact Joshua’s ability to carry out each of God’s commands and 2) how experiencing God’s faithfulness in keeping his promises might influence Joshua as Israel’s leader. Call on group leaders to report summaries of their discussions to the whole class.
6. Direct small groups to read Joshua 1:10–15 and discuss how Joshua used God’s promises to encourage the people (God is giving you the land, v. 11; God will give you rest, vv. 13, 15).
7. Instruct groups to read verses 16–18 and discuss the Israelites’ response to Joshua in light of question one in the *Study Guide*.

Encourage Application

8. Ask groups to read and discuss questions two through five in the *Study Guide*. Encourage class members to share their personal experiences during these discussions.
9. Close the class with directed prayer. Encourage groups to pray together for: 1) greater trust in God’s promises, especially when facing difficult life changes 2) courage to overcome worldly obstacles 3) discipline to obey God’s commands 4) greater faithfulness in prayer 5) diligence in Bible study 6) growing trust in God’s sovereignty and acceptance of his will for our lives.

Notes

1. Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations in lessons 1–3 are from the New American Standard Bible (1995 edition).
2. New Revised Standard Version (1989 edition).
3. Thomas H. Holmes and Richard H. Rahe, “The Social Readjustment Rating Scale,” *Journal of Psychosomatic Research*, Volume 11, Issue 2, August 1967, 213–218, Copyright © 1967 Published by Elsevier Science Inc.