"Be Strong and Courageous"
Joshua 1:1-9
January 6, 2019

INTRODUCTION:

Israel has been wandering in the wilderness for forty years, and it is now time to move into the land God had promised to give the nation. Transitions, even when they're good, can be hard. That would be even more the case if the thing from which you were transitioning was something you had been doing for forty years, as was the case here with Israel. I have read of people who have spent decades in prison and who, upon their release, deliberately commit a crime in order to be taken back into prison. Even though the old was a bad thing, it was a familiar reality, and there is some comfort in that familiarity. So as Israel is approaching this new reality, it is not surprising that God should say three times to Joshua, the leader he was calling to replace Moses, to be strong and courageous. The repetition was needed, no doubt, because the temptation was to be weak and cowardly.

We are ordaining and installing new officers in the church today, and they need to hear God's call for strength and courage. But there is a need among us all to hear this encouragement to be strong and courageous. Any who are transitioning from an old, familiar reality to a new and challenging one need to hear this word. Some of you have recently entered the new reality of retirement, while others have entered the new reality of marriage or your first child. And there is also a sense in which every new day presents us with a new opportunity to be strong and courageous as we enter into what God has for us on that particular day.

I. The Need for Strength and Courage

Our passage begins with words that highlight this need for Joshua: **"After the death of Moses the servant of the Lord."** The text goes on to say that the Lord was appointing Joshua, Moses' assistant, to take up the mantle of leadership. Moses had been leading Israel for forty years. What's more, he was pretty much the founding leader of the nation, since Israel had not really existed as a nation prior to Moses leading them out of their Egyptian bondage. So now this long-tenured, founding leader is gone. You probably know of organizations that have not transitioned well in these circumstances. It seems to be more of the norm than the exception that the leader following the long-tenured, founding leader doesn't last very long, and Joshua was that leader.

I would imagine that another reason God repeatedly told Joshua to be strong and courageous is that he was likely battling some internal doubts

about his leadership. We all tend to compare ourselves to others, and what must it have been like for Joshua to compare himself with the gifted Moses? Moses received the best education available in Egypt. For years he had been sent the hardest cases in Israel to judge and had capably done so. You would have to be delusional to compare yourself favorably with him. What's more, Joshua had a 39-year-old, painful memory of a leadership failure. It was when he led the spies into the land and reported back their findings. He reported how there were indeed obstacles to the task they faced in taking the land, but reminded everyone of God's promises to come to their aid. As you probably remember, the people rejected Joshua's message.

Verse 2 describes another obstacle when it reports God's words to Joshua to cross the Jordan River into the land. The very first step in this project looked impossible. At this point of the river, just above the Dead Sea, it has a width of about one-hundred feet and a depth between 3-10 feet during the season when it is not flooded. But it is reported later that this was flood season (3:15). It also has a swiftly-flowing current, since it drops about 600 feet in 65 miles. It was an important military feature of the land, providing an easily defensible barrier against invaders. In the few places where it could be forded, it was protected by military forces. So the Jordan River was a significant obstacle.

Once the river was crossed, other obstacles would be encountered, in the form of the Canaanites living in the land. Israel would have to fight determined, experienced and well-entrenched armies. These were the same armies that caused Israel to lose heart and determine to retreat to Egypt 39 years prior to this.

Let's apply this before moving on to our next point. We too face obstacles in our earthly pilgrimage, and it is vital that we have accurate expectations of life this side of heaven. We should expect to live the life of a soldier, not the life of a vacationer spending a week at the beach. A soldier faces obstacles every single day, obstacles requiring him to fight. Though our fighting as Christians is no longer a battle fought with swords and spears, it is still a daily battle. The New Testament speaks of it like this: **"I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul"** (1 Peter 2:11). When we read about "the passions of the flesh," most of us think of sexual sin. That is included, but it is not the primary passion we face. I am assaulted every day, multiple times a day, with the strong desire to find my righteousness in myself rather than in Christ. This is called self-righteousness. So when my wife offers some constructive criticism, my sinful passions flare up quickly into defensiveness. This is a passion that is waging war against my soul. When I compare myself to someone else and think of myself as superior, this is self-righteousness waging its war. When I compare myself to someone else and think of myself as inferior, this is self-righteousness waging its war. Such sins as envy, greed, laziness, self-trust, fear and anxiety all stem from these "passions of the flesh." It is a daily fight that will never end.

II. The Promises Enabling Strength and Courage

What's the difference between walking on the broad side of a two by four that is resting on the floor and the same two by four raised forty feet in the air? The difference is confidence, which is much easier to come by when what is at stake is a one and a half inch fall versus a forty foot fall. It is the same in this area of strength and courage. What gives us the strength and courage to move forward in the face of obstacles is confidence. And this confidence must be in the Lord rather than in ourselves. Confidence in self will lead to a retreat when powerful obstacles are encountered. Confidence in the Lord, on the other hand, leads to moving forward with strength and courage.

We get confidence in the Lord through his promises to us. I note two promises God gave to Joshua and the Israelites. First, he promised to give them the land. **"Now therefore arise, go over this Jordan, you and all this people, into the land that I am giving to them, to the people of Israel"** (v. 2). He then goes on to specify the boundaries of the land. How often must Joshua have reminded himself of this promise during the challenges of the actual campaign! If I were him, I would probably have repeated this to myself every day. "God said that he was giving this land to us. This is his idea, not mine."

One of the promises I go back to repeatedly that gives me strength and courage is the promise Jesus gave, saying that he will build his church (Matthew 16:18). As you serve in this church, whether as an officer or in any other way, obstacles are bound to come. Remember that Jesus is the King and Head of the Church. Remember, too, that we as God's people have been given the whole earth, not just a little piece of it like Israel. The whole earth is the Lord's, and we as his people are the rightful inheritors of it. We proclaim God's ownership of it with strength and courage. We fight for it, not with swords and spears, but with words of good news about Jesus.

A second promise here is the promise of God's presence with Joshua. **"Just as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will not leave you or forsake you"** (v. 5). God didn't just send Joshua out, but promised to go with him. We are promised the same, aren't we? After giving the Great Commission, Jesus said, **"Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age"** (Matt. 28:20).

The story is told of a child who had to walk each evening past a dark, spooky house. Some adults sought to give him courage. One handed him a good luck charm to ward off the ghosts. Another had a light put on the dreaded corner. Still another said earnestly, "It is sinful to be afraid. Trust God and be brave!" The advice was good, but he offered nothing more. Then someone said with compassion, "I know what it is to be afraid. I will walk with you past the

house." He did nothing to remove the fear—except to lift it from the child's shoulders and place it on his own. That's what God does for us. A man I know begins each day by saying, "Good morning, Holy Spirit! Welcome to my life and my day today."

III. The Personal Responsibility for Strength and Courage

Though God promised to give the land to Israel, he wasn't going to do it apart from Israel's partnership. He didn't tell Joshua, "Just wait here while I take care of preparing the land for you." On the contrary, much would be required of Israel and of Joshua. Similarly, as we move forward as a church into what God has for us, we are not to be passive and just wait on God to act. Rather, we partner with him. I see three ways Joshua was called to take responsibility in this partnership, and we are called to the same three things.

First, Joshua was called to take action. He was called to enter into conflict with the Canaanites in the land. Verse 5 implies the reality of that opposition. **"No one will be able to stand up against you."** He doesn't say that people won't try, only that they won't succeed. There will be conflict, and Joshua will need to accept that fact.

What do you think is the most difficult action to take as Christians? I think it is often the first step. Joshua's first step was to cross the Jordan River, and we have already mentioned the challenges associated with that. Chapter 3 describes how it happened. **"So when the people set out from their tents to pass over the Jordan with the priests bearing the ark of the covenant before the people, and as soon as those bearing the ark had come as far as the Jordan, and the feet of the priests bearing the ark were dipped in the brink of the water (now the Jordan overflows all its banks through the time of harvest), the waters coming down from above stood and rose up in a heap... And the people passed over"** (3:14-16). They started moving and experienced this enabling miracle from God at the last moment, when the feet of the priests were at the edge of the river. Instead of being discouraged at what looked to be an impossibility (taking an entire nation over a swiftly-flowing river at flood stage), they began moving.

Is there some first step God is calling you to take that you have not yet taken? Perhaps your reluctance is due to fear, to laziness or just to the fact that there seem to be too many overwhelming obstacles, like a river at flood stage. Remember that God is with you, just as he was with Joshua. That's what is meant by the priests bearing the ark. The ark is where God was. His presence with us now is not as obvious, but it is no less real. God is with you. Take that step.

A second way in which Joshua took responsibility, and in which we are called to do the same, is in the area of character development. God tells Joshua, **"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 good success"** (v. 8). Notice that Joshua is told to meditate on God's word. The Bible is not a list of rules that tell us what to do in every situation. I think many times we want something like that, particularly when we are in need of guidance from God. We want to know whom to marry, whether or not to take a particular job, should a new mother take that job out of the home or become a stay-at-home mom, should we send our children to public school, private school or homeschool. God doesn't give us explicit instructions for any of this. And for those of you who are called to be church officers, you too will face situations where you won't know what to do. God wants Joshua to meditate on his word because it is through such meditation that our character becomes more like God's. When that happens, we will know what to do. This is a process that is not unlike eating a hard candy. You have to patient with it and let it stay in your mouth and slowly dissolve rather than biting down on it immediately.

So the application is to place a high value on your relationship with God through his word. Don't neglect that work that may seem at first not to bring immediate results. Over time, it pays great dividends as our character slowly becomes more godly. What we do always flows out of who we are, and that is why God is concerned that Joshua become a man of godly integrity, a man able to lead God's people.

Third, and most importantly, all this will require Joshua to trust God. We are called to do the same. To be a Christian, you don't have to be smart or good looking. You don't have to have an impressive CV or resume. But you do have to trust God. As he calls you to move forward in some area of your life, whether it's as an officer of this church or something else, he calls you to trust him. This is the strength we are called to. Remember that our strength is in the Lord, not in ourselves. It is actually through our weakness that God shows himself strong, and this happens as we trust God.

CONCLUSION:

Did you know that Joshua is the Hebrew name for Jesus? This passage is fulfilled ultimately only in Jesus. Jesus was strong and courageous even as he endured the weakness of the cross. And in him, our way has been made prosperous and successful.

Small Group Discussion Questions
Joshua 1:1-9

1. Israel was in a significant leadership transition between Moses and Joshua. Do you have any experience with organizations that have struggled with this transition? How do you think Joshua was feeling about this transition?

2. What are some of the most significant transitions you have experienced in your life? How did you need strength and courage in the midst of those?

3. Where do you see courage being most needed in our world?

4. Joshua was also laboring under a leadership failure that happened 39 years prior to this, when Israel didn't follow his leadership to enter the Promised Land. Have there been any failures in your life that have affected your ability to serve or lead?

5. Like Joshua and Israel, we face obstacles in our earthly pilgrimage. We should expect to live the life of a soldier, not the life of a vacationer spending a week at the beach. What problems do we encounter if our expectations about this are inaccurate?

6. This passage is full of God's promises to Joshua. Note what some of those promises are. How do the promises of God encourage us to act with strength and courage?

7. God does call us to action, and he called Joshua to take the first step of crossing the Jordan. Sometimes, the first step is the hardest. Can you think of examples of that in your life? Is there some first step that you are finding difficult right now?

8. In the command to meditate on God's law, we learn that God often guides us through developing our godly character rather than telling us explicitly what we should do in every circumstance. What does it mean to meditate on God's word?