

REAL PEOPLE, REAL GOD:

Joshua in the Promised Land

Have you ever been asked to do something so beyond your ability that you felt like giving up before you even started? Today's character study begins with a glimpse of Moses' final days and then focuses on Joshua, a man assigned a God-sized task....

Israel leaves Sinai

The Israelites had been camped at the base of Mt. Sinai for a year. They'd met Yahweh, received the Law, and built the Tabernacle. Now, God would lead them toward the land of promise...

“In the second year, in the second month, on the twentieth day of the month, the cloud lifted from over the tabernacle of the testimony, and the people of Israel set out...”

Numbers 10:11-13

The people complained (*again*), longing for meat, so God gave them quail to eat—LOTS of it.

“Therefore the Lord will give you meat, and you shall eat. You shall not eat just one day, or two days, or five days, or ten days, or twenty days, but a whole month, *until it comes out at your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you*, because you have rejected the Lord who is among you and have wept before him, saying, ‘Why did we come out of Egypt?’”

Numbers 11:18-20 (*emphasis added*)

Spies Sent to Canaan (the Land God Promised)

Moses sent twelve spies into the Land God promised. When they returned, ten spies were afraid to take the Promised Land even though they had seen the land was “good” and “flowing with milk and honey.” Only two of the spies—Joshua and Caleb—urged the people to believe Yahweh's promised deliverance.

The people despaired, (REAL PEOPLE are WHINY PEOPLE) and even tried to stone Caleb and Joshua. Of course, God didn't allow it, and instead appeared in His glory, furious with the people.

“So tell them, ‘As surely as I live, declares the Lord...In this wilderness your bodies will fall—every one of you twenty years old or more who was counted in the census and who has grumbled against me. Not one of you will enter the land I swore with uplifted hand to make your home, except Caleb...and Joshua...’” **Numbers 14:28-30**

Out With the Old, In With the New

The deaths of Miriam and Aaron, two of Israel's leaders, mark a new era in Numbers 20. The unbelieving generation of Israelites has died, and a new generation of Israelites is on their way to the Promised Land. Moses still leads them for the first few battles with Joshua at his side—an apprentice in training. But the new generation seems to be as cranky as the old...

In Dry Places

“Why have you brought the assembly of the Lord into this wilderness, that we should die here, both we and our cattle? And why have you made us come up out of Egypt to bring us to this evil place? It is no place for grain or figs or vines or pomegranates, and there is no water to drink.” **Numbers 20:4-5**

So God provided water—again.

“And Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock with his staff twice, and water came out abundantly, and the congregation drank, and their livestock.” **Numbers 20:11**

This may have been the first miracle the “new” generation of Israelites witnessed. All reaped the miracle of manna each morning, but that may have become so normal that, in their minds, it was no longer a display of God's glory.

After God delivered them from thirst, He delivered them from the Canaanite king of Arad. STILL, they complained. This time, about “miserable food” (manna) and no water to drink (Numbers 21:5). As a result of their discontent, God sent snakes to bite the Israelites, and many died, but God gave them a way out.

“And the Lord said to Moses, ‘Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.’” **Numbers 21:8**

Battlegrounds

After the crisis of serpents, the Israelites moved toward the Promised Land, encountering interference from both King Sihon (Amorites) and King Og of Bashan. God delivered both kings and their lands into the hands of the Israelites.

King Balak of Moab heard of the Israelites' journey through the land as they claimed victory after victory, so he hired a “prophet” named Balaam to curse Israel.

God's REAL PEOPLE were in REAL DANGER and needed to trust their REAL GOD for His REAL POWER to shield them—and He did, forbidding Balaam to curse the Israelites even to

the point of causing a donkey to speak! But while God systematically displayed His faithfulness, His people displayed their faithlessness.

The Moabite king couldn't curse them, but the Moabite women seduced them, causing Israel's men to worship Baal. Yahweh's anger was again kindled and He sent a plague upon them (Numbers 25). Aaron's grandson, Phinehas, stopped the plague and secured the high priesthood for future generations of his family.

Transition of Leadership Complete

Numbers 26-36 concludes with a census and God's instructions to Moses on the boundaries of the Promised Land. Deuteronomy 34 tells us the end of Moses' story, his death and burial on Mount Nebo, and the official passing-of-the-baton to Joshua.

“Now Joshua son of Nun was filled with the *spirit of wisdom because Moses had laid his hands* on him. So the Israelites listened to him and did what the Lord had commanded Moses.” **Deuteronomy 34:9** (*emphasis* added)

Ready or Not

After our marathon journey through Numbers, it's clear that these REAL PEOPLE aren't very good at following God, and yet our REAL GOD still brought them to the edge of the Promised Land. God did for the Israelites what they couldn't have done for themselves—even though they whined and complained and shook with fear along the way.

So, now we've got a new leader, Joshua, taking on a huge task—leading this unruly band of people into a land that was currently occupied by “giants.” Most of our Bibles call them “Anakites.”

And it seemed Joshua needed some pep talks. Moses gave Joshua a commissioning speech in Deuteronomy 31 in which he repeated certain phrases:

- **31:6 – Be strong and courageous.** Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the LORD your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you.
- **31:7 – Be strong and courageous,** for you must go with this people into the land.
- **31:23 – Be strong and courageous,** for you will bring the Israelites into the land I promised them.

Then, in the beginning of Joshua's book, God gives him another pep talk—the first DIRECT CONVERSATION between God and Joshua—using the same phraseology that Moses used:

“***Be strong and courageous***, for you shall cause this people to inherit the land that I swore to their fathers to give them. ***Only be strong and very courageous***, being careful to do according to all the law that Moses my servant commanded you...Have I not commanded you? ***Be strong and courageous***. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.” **Joshua 1:6-9** (*emphasis added*)

It’s not that Joshua was a scaredy-cat. It’s that Joshua had an utterly impossible job to do and needed our REAL GOD’s repeated assurance—and intervention.

Enemy Territory

God empowered Joshua with His Spirit, but He knew a leader with no followers ain’t much of a leader. So God needed to show Israel that Joshua was His man, His choice...

“Today I will begin to exalt you in the eyes of all Israel, so they may know that I am with you as I was with Moses. Tell the priests who carry the ark of the covenant: ‘When you reach the edge of the Jordan’s waters, go and stand in the river.’” **Joshua 3:7,8**

Sort of a baby-sized Red Sea miracle, but it was big enough to show the REAL PEOPLE that God—and Joshua—were in charge.

“When the whole nation had finished crossing the Jordan, the Lord said to Joshua, ‘Choose twelve men from among the people, one from each tribe, and tell them to take up twelve stones from the middle of the Jordan, from right where the priests are standing, and carry them over with you and put them down at the place where you stay tonight.’” **Joshua 4:2,3**

Joshua leads; God moves; the people obey. What’s next? Maybe a battle?

Worse, actually.

Mark of the Covenant

Circumcising the next generation—it was Joshua’s initiation to leadership. Yikes!

“At that time the Lord said to Joshua, ‘Make flint knives and circumcise the Israelites again.’... Now this is why he did so: All those who came out of Egypt—all the men of military age—died in the wilderness on the way after leaving Egypt. All the people that came out had been circumcised, but all the people born in the wilderness during the journey from Egypt had not.” **Joshua 5:2-5**

The whole nation obeyed. *Amazing!* After all the faithLESS things Israel has done, this is a huge step in obedience.

“And after the whole nation had been circumcised, they remained where they were in camp until they were healed. Then the Lord said to Joshua, ‘Today I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you.’ So the place has been called Gilgal to this day.” **Joshua 5:8,9**

The Walls

The conquering of Jericho might seem like an easy battle. The city was all shut up because they feared the Israelites. No one would come out to fight. Do you remember the story? All Israel had to do is walk around the city for a few days and then blow some trumpets. Easy, right?

Was it easy to march three days after circumcision? In range of Jericho’s archers? For days, Israel marched in complete silence around a city with impenetrable walls. No, I don’t think it was easy. And did it prepare Joshua for what he faced next?

An Imperfect Record

After the rousing victory over Jericho, Joshua sent out scouts to the next city, Ai. The scouts reported back, and Joshua sent only 3,000 Israelite warriors to take the city...without consulting Yahweh for the battle plan.

“...but [Israel was] routed by the men of Ai, who killed about thirty-six of them...And Joshua said, ‘Alas, Sovereign Lord, why did you ever bring this people across the Jordan to deliver us into the hands of the Amorites to destroy us...’” **Joshua 7:4,5,7**

Our new leader Joshua sounds a little like the whining Israelites, doesn’t he? I think we’re witnessing his crisis of faith. We all have them. Some of us more than once. This is the same Joshua who reported that Israel could take the Promised Land forty years earlier. Here, Joshua seems to think God has failed him—failed Israel.

“The Lord said to Joshua, ‘Stand up! What are you doing down on your face? Israel has sinned...They have taken some of the devoted things; they have stolen, they have lied, they have put them with their own possessions...Whoever is caught with the devoted things shall be destroyed!’” **Joshua 7:10,11,15**

After dealing with the Law-breaker, what do you think the Lord said to Joshua?

“***Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged.*** Take the whole army with you, and go up and attack Ai. For I have delivered into your hands the king of Ai, his people, his city and his land.’ Then the Lord said to Joshua, ‘Hold out toward Ai the javelin that is in your hand, for into your hand I will deliver the city.’” **Joshua 8:18** (*emphasis added*)

The Bible shows us leaders that mess up, so we know He can still use us in our own imperfections.

The Biggest Challenge Yet

Joshua really was coming up against impossible odds, over and over again. And the stakes kept getting higher and higher.

“When Jabin king of Hazor heard of this, he sent word to Jobab king of Madon, to the kings of Shimron and Akshaph, and to the northern kings who were in the mountains, in the Arabah south of Kinnereth, in the western foothills and in Naphoth Dor on the west; to the Canaanites in the east and west; to the Amorites, Hittites, Perizzites and Jebusites in the hill country; and to the Hivites below Hermon in the region of Mizpah. They came out with all their troops and a large number of horses and chariots—a huge army, as numerous as the sand on the seashore. All these kings joined forces and made camp together...to fight against Israel. The Lord said to Joshua, ‘***Do not be afraid of them,*** because by this time tomorrow I will hand all of them, slain, over to Israel.’”

Joshua 11:1-6 (*emphasis added*)

Joshua needed regular reminders from the Lord not to fear and so do we. Our giants and enemies are different than Joshua’s, but we still find it hard to be strong and courageous. Our REAL GOD gives us that same reassurance through His Word and His Spirit—a constant Presence that never fails. Even when our circumstances change, our God doesn’t. He is still big, and He is still with us.

Claiming Ground

As we progress through the book of Joshua, chapter 12 gives us a list of defeated kings. In chapter 13, God tells Joshua he and the Israelites are done fighting though there is still considerable land to be taken. Chapter 14 begins the distribution of Land to Israel’s tribes, decided by casting lots (kind of like dice we use today). Within that distribution, certain land was assigned to Caleb and Joshua specifically because of their faithful report as spies when they left Egypt decades ago.

And what about the Tabernacle?

“The whole assembly of the Israelites gathered at Shiloh (tribe of Ephraim) and set up the tent of meeting there.” **Joshua 18:1**

The Levites also came to Shiloh to receive their unique allotment of towns and pasturelands within the inheritance of each tribe (since their inheritance was serving the Lord).

Joshua’s Farewell

“After a long time had passed and the Lord had given Israel rest from all their enemies around them, Joshua, by then a very old man, summoned all Israel...and said to them... ‘This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: [he gives a summary of Israel’s history from Abraham to their present].’ The Lord said, ‘So I gave you a land on which you did not toil and cities you did not build; and you live in them and eat from vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant. Now fear the Lord and serve him with all faithfulness...But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve... ***But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.***’ Then the people answered, ‘Far be it from us to forsake the Lord to serve other gods!’... Joshua said to the people, ‘You are not able to serve the Lord. He is a holy God; he is a jealous God. He will not forgive your rebellion and your sins...’ But the people said to Joshua, ‘No! We will serve the Lord.’ Then Joshua said, ‘You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen to serve the Lord.’ ‘Yes, we are witnesses,’ they replied.” **Joshua 24:2-24** (*emphasis added*)

After years as Moses’ apprentice, more years as the sole leader of Israel, and even more years of rest in the Promised Land, Joshua knew the same thing we’ve learned in these studies: REAL PEOPLE are FORGETFUL PEOPLE. He knew some had *already* forgotten the God they promised to serve...

“‘Now then,’ said Joshua, ‘throw away the foreign gods that are among you and yield your hearts to the Lord, the God of Israel.’ And the people said to Joshua, ‘We will serve the Lord our God ***and obey him.***’ On that day Joshua made a covenant for the people...And Joshua recorded these things in the Book of the Law of God...” **Joshua 24:23-27** (*emphasis added*)

Joshua pushed them for more than just a cliché, “We will *serve* the Lord.” He pushed them to vow *obedience* and then held them accountable by recording it for us to see thousands of years later.

How about you? If Joshua challenged you today, could you vow to wholeheartedly obey God? Are you brave enough to let someone hold you accountable?

Today's Question:

- Is it hard for you to believe that your God—Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today, and forever—is the same God that delivered the Israelites from Egypt and took them into the Promised Land? How does it change your prayer life to realize He IS. THAT. POWERFUL. GOD?

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