

Receiving Your Inheritance

Messages from the Book of Joshua

Message 2

Character of a Leader

Joshua 1:1-18

Introduction

Robert Altman made news today by declaring from his quarters in London that the American government is disgusting, and that George W. Bush is unfit to be our president. Perhaps the most newsworthy aspect of this outburst is its stark contrast with the opinion of most Americans. George Bush's approval ratings among Americans are about as high as they can get. Clearly the general consensus here is that he is doing a fine job running the federal government and fighting a war in Afghanistan. How do we account for this? How has Bush changed from a barely elected president viewed by many as marginally capable into an admired leader? Particularly, since it is the thing which seems most important right now, how has he managed to achieve startling success in a war everyone agreed would be extremely difficult? What is the secret of his success? Is it his record of battlefield exploits? Or his brilliant grasp of military theory? Has Bush built on his stellar success in business previous to entering government? No, for all the arenas in which we would look for past achievement as an indicator of future accomplishment, we find instead the mediocre performance which exposed Bush to ridicule from those who know about these things. I like George Bush, and I also think he is doing a good job. But I admit, nothing he did previously indicated he would be a great leader. Something else is involved here.

In today's Doonesbury comic strip Gary Trudeau has George Bush referring to Enron, the giant energy corporation which just went bankrupt. Bush says, "I did not have political relations with that corporation," a phrase brought into popular use by Bill Clinton when he denied having sex with a subordinate. Both Democrats and Republicans benefitted from political contributions from Enron, but I don't think either party did anything wrong. But the whole world knows that Bill Clinton was an immoral man. The part we disagree on is whether this matters. Can a man be an effective president even though he lives an immoral life? Many people think so, and this viewpoint has been promoted vigorously. The fantastic economic growth during Clinton's term is submitted as evidence to prove the point. Others disagree. Peggy Noonan, one of Ronald Reagan's speech writers, just wrote a book about her former boss titled *When Character Was King*. She "argues that the secret of Reagan's success was no secret at all. It was his character – his courage, his kindness, his persistence, his honesty, and his almost heroic patience in the face of setbacks..."¹

I say all this not because politics is so engrossing, and I know you did not come here tonight to hear my political views. But our scripture tonight deals in topics which are with us in every generation and every day. What does it take to lead people? What is necessary to win a war? And where does character fit into the picture?

Preparation of a Leader

Last week we traced the history of the people of Israel from God's call of Abraham in Mesopotamia to their encampment on the banks of the Jordan River across from the land of Canaan. God had promised Abraham a new, wonderful home if he would leave his family and community and go where God led him. God took Abraham to the land of Canaan, but Abraham never actually got more than a cemetery plot. Abraham believed that God would keep His promise and give that land to his son. Eventually Abraham's

¹ Peggy Noonan, *When Character Was King*, (Viking Penguin, New York, 2001), Flyleaf.

descendants settled in a fertile part of Egypt, but that was no home for them. The Egyptians persecuted them and finally God sent Moses to rescue them. God performed amazing miracles to free His people, including destroying the whole Egyptian army. God led the Israelites, several million of them, through the treacherous desert to Canaan, But when they got there, their nerve failed them. They sent spies into the land, and they discovered that it was unbelievably lush. Grapes were as big as grapefruit. Food was plentiful and delicious. But the land was populated by giants, and the people were terrified of them. In spite of the fact that they had seen God wipe out a whole army of Egyptians, they refused to trust God to overcome the giants. In fear and sorrow they turned back. God responded to this rebellion by condemning the whole nation to wander in the desert for 40 years, until every adult had died. They never saw the wonderful home God had prepared for them. Instead, they spent their whole lives in the wretched desert, and their carcasses remained there forever.

Joshua saw all this. Joshua was one of the spies who checked out Canaan. But he and Caleb did not agree with the majority report. Those two tried in vain to persuade the people to trust God to defeat the giants. Joshua and Caleb had 40 years to reflect on the consequences of disobedience and lack of faith. And since they had been faithful, they alone of all the people were allowed to enter the land.

If you were to make a list of virtues, which would head your list? Love? Mercy? Strength? Where would you rank courage? I think many of us think that courage is a sort of optional virtue. It is a wonderful quality, and is rather necessary for soldiers and explorers, but is not really necessary for the rest of us – especially Christians. It seems too aggressive to be genuinely Christian. But if you are thinking this way, you are wrong. For lack of courage the men of Israel caused their families to suffer in the desert, and for lack of courage they never received God’s promise. So when the time comes for Moses to pass leadership over to Joshua, courage is one of the themes of his farewell address. Last week we read this passage, but I want to read it again. We are in Deuteronomy 31:1-8.

Then Moses went and spoke these words to all Israel. And he said to them: “I am one hundred and twenty years old today. I can no longer go out and come in. Also the LORD has said to me, ‘You shall not cross over this Jordan.’ The LORD your God Himself crosses over before you; He will destroy these nations from before you, and you shall dispossess them. Joshua himself crosses over before you, just as the LORD has said. And the LORD will do to them as He did to Sihon and Og, the kings of the Amorites and their land, when He destroyed them. The LORD will give them over to you, that you may do to them according to every commandment which I have commanded you. Be strong and of good courage, do not fear nor be afraid of them; for the LORD your God, He is the One who goes with you. He will not leave you nor forsake you.” Then Moses called Joshua and said to him in the sight of all Israel, “Be strong and of good courage, for you must go with this people to the land which the LORD has sworn to their fathers to give them, and you shall cause them to inherit it. And the LORD, He is the one who goes before you. He will be with you, He will not leave you nor forsake you; do not fear nor be dismayed.”

Deuteronomy 31:1-8

Look at how Moses seeks to encourage the Israelites. First he reminds them that God Himself will go with them over the Jordan River into Canaan. The giants are not the Israelites’ problem. They never were, for God always was going to fight for them. And He always will, if they obey Him. God is the great warrior of Israel. He rides into battle before them and destroys their enemies before them. God is present and will never leave them. Second, Moses reminds them that God has already proven Himself by destroying two nations and their kings, Og and Sihon. Moses is saying, “Israel, remember Og and Sihon. God obliterated them, and He will do that to all your enemies. Don’t forget!” Third, God commanded the Israelites and Joshua to be courageous. This is critical. This is the point on which they had failed 40 years before, with

disastrous consequences. It is so vital that Moses repeats himself, in verses 6, 7, and 8.

At last Moses' time was up. God led him up to a high mountain and showed him the wonderful home for his people. And then God took Moses to an even better home, even closer to Him, the eternal home Moses sought all his life. Moses was dead.

The Call to Lead

Last night we celebrated Christopher's birthday by going to see the movie *Endurance*, about Shackleton and his attempt to cross Antarctica in 1914. The theme of the movie was Shackleton's brilliant leadership, in maintaining morale among his men when they were faced with terrible uncertainty. If morale slipped, they would all perish, but even with good morale they might perish anyway. They struggled for months in extremely harsh circumstances in the hope they would escape to their homes. Leadership in such circumstance is a great challenge.

Moses had an even greater task, for he had to lead people who knew in advance they would fail to reach their destination. Moses faced famine, lack of water, and rebellion – and he succeeded brilliantly. Now it was Joshua's turn. How would he fill such shoes? How could he ever rise to the occasion? He knew how rebellious the people were. Would they accept him as their leader?

God spoke to Joshua, and he got right to the point. Moses is dead. He is gone for good. He will never be there again for Joshua to rely on. It is futile to wish for Moses to lead the Israelites. But then God reiterated His promises to Joshua. He promised to give them the land of Canaan. All of it. From the desert in the south to Lebanon in the north, from the Euphrates River in the east to the Mediterranean Sea in the west, and everything in between. Furthermore, he repeated His promise to fight for them. "No man shall be able to stand before you all the days of your life." And if Joshua was worried about how he would compare to Moses, God said He would be with Joshua *just as He had been with Moses!* These were very comforting words to Joshua, and I am sure he was enormously relieved to hear such things from God first-hand. But then God issued His instructions to Joshua. And in these instructions we can see God's priorities as Joshua prepares to lead Israel to war.

The Necessity of Courage

Here it is again – "Be strong and of good courage." Moses had said it, and now God is saying it. And just as Moses had repeated himself, so God hammers relentlessly on this point. Verse 7: "Only be strong and very courageous." Verse 9: "Have I not commanded you? Be strong and of good courage; do not be afraid, nor be dismayed, for the LORD your God *is* with you wherever you go." God did not chose to focus on military strategy, or intelligence, or armaments, or personnel – but His first briefing to His general has to do with a character issue. Wellington said an army goes forward on its provisions. We admire Hannibal and Alexander and Napoleon for their military genius. And the North won the Civil War largely because of their economic power. But these are not the central issues. Courage is the indispensable requirement.

But the courage we are speaking of here is not only that sort of bravery which propels men into enemy fire. It is not only a great and noble effort for a great and noble cause. It is that strength of character by which men, women, and children face frightening circumstances, and refuse to back down. It is a mother who bears child after child, knowing that each pregnancy and childbirth is draining, difficult and dangerous. It is a child who refuses to join his friends when they do something displeasing to God. It is a man who refuses to participate in unscrupulous practices and takes a demotion as a result. It is a preacher who declares God's Word faithfully to those who mock. Courage is ordinary people doing the right thing everyday in the face of fear and opposition. Courage is when you go to church Sunday before a big exam,

and bravely take a lower grade for it. Courage is when you write a paper with a Christian perspective and earn the hostility of your professor. Courage is when you insist on purity with the opposite sex, and become a laughingstock in your frat or sorority.

Courage is obedience to God when it is difficult or dangerous. It is a determination to follow God's Word in the face of opposition. But such courage is not a hopeless romantic excursion. For it is based on the promises of God. Just as God promised to be with Joshua, He promises to be with His people in all times and places. Before Jesus returned to His Father, He said, "I will be with you always, even to the end of the age." This is true for you. God is with you, always, and in every situation. Just as Joshua could trust Him thousands of years ago, you can trust Him now.

So another side to courage is faith. Courage is trusting God in perilous circumstances. It is believing His promises and expecting Him to come through for you. It is the confidence that God will give you a good job, even if you get a C on that exam because you went to church. It is believing that God will give you a good husband or wife, or a good life as a single person, if you trust him with your sexuality. Courage is what makes a man and woman faithful to each other, trusting that God has given them the best for each other. Courage is trusting God to keep His promise to be with us and care for us through all life's uncertainties and difficulties. Courage is an aspect of faith, without which you cannot see God.

Confronting your friends – Drexel situation
Luther vs. the pope

The Source of Courage

But you may be thinking, "Wait a minute! I am not at all courageous. In fact, I am pretty fearful. I thought Jesus would welcome such as me, so I came to Him. But I don't think I can be a big hero like Joshua. Isn't courage just for missionaries and monks?"

Rev. 21:8

God's commands are the key
Scripture gives you courage.
Meditation, memorizing
Daily time in scripture
Do all

Joshua obeyed (vv 10-15)
The people responded (vv 16-18)

Character is King – more than skill, experience, intelligence.
RUF

Ministry Team Bible studies – most on character
judicious use of church growth practices
Above all, be godly.
More important than skill as engineer
insight as a teacher
strength as an athlete

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