

God's Big Story: The Promised Land

Joshua 1:1-9

A sermon preached by Dr. Calvin Warpula

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The first verse of the book of Joshua says, "Moses my servant is dead." Moses had led Israel for forty years. He was the only leader the people had known. He was the one that God used to bring them out of Egypt, give the law, organize the tabernacle construction, bring them to Kadesh-Barnea where they failed miserably to trust and obey God, and then for the past 38 years had been their spokesman and God's leader for them in the wilderness. The first five books of the Bible [Gen. Ex. Lev. Num. and Deut.] are attributed to him. At the end of Deuteronomy, Moses brings them to the very edge of the Promised Land but because of a failure many years before, God does not permit him to enter the Promised Land. All the Israelites 20 years and older that were present at Kadesh-Barnea in the big test of faith and obedience, except Caleb and Joshua, were dead. They had all been buried in the rocky wilderness over the past 38 years. The present Israelites, the oldest of whom would be 60 years old, were just children or youth in Egypt.

Moses is one of the greatest characters of the Bible. His name is over 700 times in the Bible. Moses gave leadership, stability, organization, direction, and a God-centered focus to Israel. There was never another like him until the coming of Jesus the Messiah. Before he died, Moses appointed Joshua, his trustworthy aide, military commander, and disciple to be his successor. Abraham Lincoln was an unknown Illinois prairie lawyer when someone asked him if he had political ambitions. The future president replied, "I will prepare myself and be ready. Perhaps my chance will come." Joshua prepared himself and he was ready when his time came.

God called Moses to the top of Mt. Pisgah, or Mt. Nebo, as it is also called, and there he got to see the Promised Land, much like the view on the slide on the screen. Then he died with the kisses of God and was buried by the angels.

Moses is dead. Now what? What did God say? “Moses is dead, now you’re all hopelessly lost with no leader, no direction, and no focus. You’re a big mess. The grand experiment has failed. It’s all downhill from here. The future is dark and pessimistic.” Is that what God said? No.

What did God say? “Moses my servant is dead. Arise and go and cross the Jordan River to the land that I will give you. Moses is dead but I am not finished with Israel. Six hundred years ago I promised Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that their descendants would inherit this land. Now is the time for the promise to be kept. My word stands firm and sure. I am faithful to my promises. I am ready now to give you the land.”

Six hundred years after the original promise, God fulfills his word. God always keeps his promises. It may not be today or tomorrow, or next week, or next month, or next year, but he always keeps his promises.

I am not always able to keep my promises. I have failed many times to honor the commitments that I make. When I was 16 years old, in about March, the little church at Argo in Walker Co., AL asked me to come preach for them on the fifth Sunday in May. I agreed and told them I would be there. The promise did not make a big connection with me because a month or so later, the Plainview church near Fulton, MS asked me to preach for them on the fifth Sunday of May. I agreed to come. On the fifth Sunday of May, I was at Plainview. The next week I got a phone call from the brothers at Argo, “Brother Warpula, we had big plans for you on the fifth Sunday of May. We had advertised it widely and you did not show up. We were greatly disappointed. What happened?” All I could say is that my mind was uncertain about my commitment to be with them that day and that I was extremely sorry. I told them I would love to come at another time, to give me a second chance to make it up to them. They finished our conversation by saying they did not know if that was possible or not. It must not have been, because, as I recall, I never was invited again to preach for that church. Every time even now

that I drive through that little community, I remember that mistake that I made over 50 years ago.

Another example of my over-speaking and over-committing comes to mind. In 1971, I was preaching for the Berclair church on Summer Ave. in Memphis, TN. Melissa was 6 years old and Tim was 3. Every morning when we got up we smelled fresh bread cooking in the ovens of a large regional bakery less than a mile east of our house on Summer Ave. I told my two little children, "Someday, daddy will take you for a tour of that bakery and we will see how they make that bread. They will probably give us some free samples, too." Well, weeks and months went by. A year went by. The children asked me a few times, "Daddy, when are we going to go to that bakery?" I always said "Oh, we are, we will, we will do it soon." Well, the days spent into weeks and the weeks into months. In October of the next year, Judy and I moved from Memphis to Amarillo. As we were leaving town the kids said, "Daddy, we never went to the bakery." I said, "Yes, kids, I know it, but we will find one in Texas and we'll go to it." That was 40 years ago. Every now and then when we are talking about something I tell the family I want to do with them, Melissa, who is now 45 years old, will say, "Dad, how do we know you will keep your word? You never took us to the bakery." Well, the best thing I can do now is to find a bakery here in Houston, and set up a tour for her children, now aged 18 to 13. I didn't intentionally misstate the truth; I just over spoke and never followed through.

Thank God that God is not like me. Our God is a promise-keeping God. Six hundred years went by since the promise to Abraham. Sometimes we feel that if God does not answer our prayers in a day or a week, or a month that God has failed us. God answers our prayers but not always the way we think nor the time we think. After years and years, generations and generations, in fact, centuries, God kept his promise.

Moses is dead, but God lives on. God buries his workmen but continues his work. No one is indispensable, not even Moses. As a young preacher, when I went to a church and worked with them a while and things got to moving smoothly, I would imagine, "How did this church ever get by without me? And when I leave, how will they survive?" Well, I moved on, or they moved me on, and they survived, sometimes even better without me than with me.

In the history of Israel and of the church, great leaders have come and gone but God's work keeps going. Many of my professors at Freed-Hardeman and Abilene Christian Colleges who taught me so very much have now moved on to the other world. I am moving in that direction myself. It's hard for me to believe that it has been fifty years since I graduated from high school. This church has had a great past. Last Wednesday night, elder Ralph Arnold said that he had found a 1972 directory of this church and that we had 256 families at that time. Many of our beloved preachers, elders, teachers and deacons of the past have gone the way of all the earth. But God's work still goes on. God's commands, promises, and presence are still with us now and will be with those who follow us, even after we are gone.

God says, "Moses is dead, now move forward." The people have a new leader and they face new territory. Could Joshua fill Moses' shoes? The new land ahead was full of Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites. The people were undoubtedly frightened, anxious, and uncertain. They knew they could survive in the wilderness but could they make it in Canaan? They are asking themselves, "Do we go on? How can we go on?"

God answers, "Go forward. Cross the Jordan. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will not fail you or forsake you." Many times in our lives we stand where they stood: on the verge of the Jordan. Behind us is the safe, the familiar, the known. Ahead of us is the unknown, the unsafe, the unfamiliar. The future is unpredictable and clouded with uncertainty. Often we are anxious and fearful.

What do we do when we face natural and unnatural transitions? When your world is changed, how do you stand? God's message to Israel is his message for us today.

We cannot go back to the past any more than Israel could go back to Sinai. We dare not stagnate in the present any more than Israel could camp forever on the banks of the Jordan. They had to move ahead and so must we. We must not say, 'Lord, we are tired. We just want to sit down and rest and stay here just as we are now for the next ten years.' When the Lord says, "Go," we must not delay. We must not sit. We must move out in faith, just as Israel did at the Jordan River 1300 years before Jesus came to earth.

God gives Israel this assurance: “I will give you this land.” This does not mean that the Israelites did not need to fight the battles to take the land from those presently living there. God gave them the land. He would fight their battles for them. He would guide them and strengthen them. The enemies would not be able to overcome them. But they also must act. Faith means obedience. God would not give them the land if they just sat down and prayed, or if they just thought that God would hand it to them without their involvement. No, they had to obey God. They had to cross the Jordan River. They had to march around Jericho for seven days and thirteen times. They had to fight the peoples of the land in the central section, the south and in the north. It took them seven years to conquer most of the land. It was not easy. Battles, real battles with real soldiers and real chariots and walled cities had to be fought, but God was giving them the land. God’s gifts are appropriated by faith. Faith means doing God’s will. God gave them the Promised Land but they had to occupy it which meant fight the enemies who were now living in it.

God promises to be with us, too. He never commands us to do something without enabling us to do it. And he never commands us to do something without promising to be with us while we do it. Israel was not alone. They were to be strong and of good courage as they trusted and obeyed God. Today, we are to be strong and of good courage and trust and obey God.

The most precious promise of all is that God promises to be with us as we do his will. God says to Joshua, “As I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will never leave you nor forsake you.” He says the same to us. Jesus said, “I am with you always until the end of the world.” As the church of Christ, we are doing the work of Christ in the name of Christ by the power of Christ and with the presence of Christ. We are not alone.

Listen to what the Lord said to Joshua [read 1:7b-8]. God is in effect saying, “Joshua, you will need to constantly consult the books of the Law written by Moses. Here you will find truth, righteousness, direction, commands, promises, examples, and encouragement. Keep this word in your heart. Meditate on these things all the time. Then you will be able to know what my will is for you and for the nation.” God is telling the new leader of his people: Feed yourself on my word. As a leader, you cannot feed unless you are fed. As a preacher, the first person I

always preach to is myself. If the sermon doesn't affect me, how can I expect it to touch someone else? That's what God is saying to us today.

We have the completed word of God, the OT and the NT. We have everything that God has revealed to us. We are to be a people of the book. This is not bibliolatry. We are not worshippers of the book any more than Joshua was. These are God's words and to know God's mind, we must read and follow what God has revealed about himself and his will for us. To neglect the Bible, is to neglect God. No one can be a strong, victorious Christian who is not a student of the word of God. That's why we emphasize studying the Bible. That's why we constantly say in our sermons, "The Bible says." All the false teaching and false practices in religion are the result of not listening to God. The church honors Christ when it follows his word completely. We can know the mind of God by reading what God says. We can know what God wants us to believe and do by reading the Bible. That's why we encourage everyone to read the Bible.

Seven-two percent of American Christians have never read through the entire Bible. We want to do something about that. In January, we will begin a program of reading through the Bible in 90 days. By reading 12 pages a day, about 10-12 chapters, a person can read through the Bible in 90 days. We will do our readings then meet on Wednesday nights to discuss what we have read. We will do this for 90 days, or three months. I encourage you to join with us and let's read God's word together and then meet weekly to share what we have learned and to encourage one another. Of course, you can do this on your own if you wish. Just begin today reading 12 chapters of text a day, and in 90 days, 88 actually with two days of grace, you will have read through the entire Bible. A Bible-reading church is a God-loving church. A God-loving church is a God-obeying church. A God-obeying church is a God-glorifying church. It all starts with Bible reading. Of course, merely to read Scripture and know what it says is not enough. We must obey it. But, of course, we cannot obey it unless we know what it says so that's why we must start with Bible reading.

God gives Joshua the formula for success: "Be strong and courageous, listen to my word. I am with you." The same works well for us today, doesn't it?

Over the next seven years, Joshua led in a conquest of the land of Canaan, the Promised Land. Joshua was probably about the same age as Caleb, his counterpart at Kadesh-Barnea when they were the two spies who encouraged Israel to move forward and take the land as God promised. That means that Joshua is about 80 years here in chapter one. We believe the book of Joshua covers some 27 years of Israel's history. During this time they conquered the land and divided it among the tribes.

Toward the end of his life, Joshua gave two final addresses to the people of Israel. They are in the last two chapters, 23 and 24. In chapter 23, Joshua, now an old man approaching 110 years old, reminds the people to obey God. Before Moses died, he encouraged the people to listen to God and to obey him. Now, Joshua, facing his death, encourages the people to listen to God and obey him. Hear what he said [read 23:6-9]. Joshua tells the people that God has kept all his promises and that God has given them the land he had promised them. There was still land to be conquered but the problem was not in God, but the people. God gave them every part of the land they were willing to fight for. The parts they bypassed, the cities they did not conquer, and the peoples they left in the land that gave them trouble in years to come were left there because of the people's refusal to totally subdue the land as God told them to.

Joshua reminds them that God has kept his promises but that they must be on their guard against compromising with the evil still in the land. Hear him in vs. 14-16: [read].

In Joshua's final address in chapter 24 he reminds Israel of their history. He tells how God brought them out of Egypt and delivered them from all their enemies. Then he draws this conclusion: [read vs. 14-15]. The people committed themselves to obey God's laws in everything. Then Joshua wrote a copy of God's laws and decrees. The Bible records: [read vs. 26-27]. Shortly thereafter Joshua dies at the age of 110.

This book which began with the death of Moses closes with the death of Joshua. Joshua's influence was so great that even after his death the people continued to serve the Lord. The next book of the Bible, Judges, says in chapter 2,

verse 7 [read]. The people served God during the time they remembered Joshua and even during the time of the people who remembered Joshua. .

God is working out his plans in the world. God has now brought Israel into the promised land, a land they will occupy for the next 1300 plus years. During that time, God will be at work in judges, kings, and prophets to bring about his perfect will for the world. That will is revealed in Jesus of Nazareth who is the second person of the Godhead who has become flesh and dwelt here on earth among us. As God the Son, Jesus is the perfect representation of God the Father. All the fullness of deity dwells in him in body form (Col. 1:15-22). He is God the Father's anointed king to rule our lives for God. He is God the Father's anointed prophet to reveal God's total will for our lives. He is God the Father's priest to forgive our sins by his perfect, once-for-all sacrifice on the cross. He was raised from the dead never to die again. He is now representing us in heaven. He will come again to raise the dead and gather all peoples before him in a great day of judgment. The righteous of God will go to be with God forever and ever; the wicked who have lived without God will be forever separated from God.

God the Father is continuing now to fulfill his plan to bless all nations through Jesus, the seed of Abraham. Through the preaching of the message of Jesus, God has been in the process of bringing sinful men and women into a forgiven relationship with him since the day of Pentecost, A. D. 30, in Acts chapter two. When we surrender to the Lordship of Jesus, God places us in his universal, intergenerational, international, multi-ethnic, multi-cultural kingdom. This kingdom is not an earthly, geographical one but a spiritual realm where Jesus Christ is King. He rules in truth, love and righteousness (John 18:36; Rom. 14:17).

Today, you can become a child of God by faith in Jesus Christ. Today, you can be born again and enter God's kingdom (John 3:3, 5). Today, you can be baptized into Christ and be clothed with Christ. When you belong to Christ, then you are an heir of God's great promise to Abraham (Gal. 3:26-29).

Today, God invites you to come to him, to know him in a personal relationship, and to be a participant in his great plan for the universe. Today, we'll help you develop your faith and obey God's word. We invite you to join with us

and share in God's great story. Whosoever will may come while we stand and sing.

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