

JOSHUA: GUIDEBOOK TO VICTORY

by Ray C. Stedman

The book of Joshua (whose name means "God is salvation") is packed with practical lessons -- challenging concepts to help grasp the principles of a Spirit-led life. The key to the book is given to us in the New Testament: "these things...were written down for our instruction, upon whom the end of the ages has come." (1 Cor. 10:11) What the people of Israel went through in their actual historical experiences become patterns, or metaphors that we can apply to the spiritual battles in the spiritual pilgrimage in which we are engaged. These experiences have an exact and accurate application to us.

Joshua is one of the two books of the Old Testament that every Christian should master. (The other is the book of Daniel.) These messages are primarily designed to help Christians withstand the first full impact of the battle of the world, the flesh, and the devil. If you feel the force of the opposing powers; if the tremendous, subtle deceptiveness of the principalities and powers against which we are engaged have come upon you so that you sense that you are in the conflict (Eph. 6:12), these books will be especially important to you.

The fact that Joshua follows the book of Deuteronomy is certainly in the wisdom and care of God. Deuteronomy prepares us for Joshua by introducing us to the great second law of the spiritual life -- "the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set me free from the law of sin and death" (Rom. 8:2) -- which will lead us into the experience set forth in Joshua as the book of victory.

The book of Joshua falls into three main divisions. Chapters one through four concern the entrance into the land and all that involves. If you are struggling right now with how to enter into a life of victory with Christ, how to move out of the wilderness of doubt, restless wanderings, and mere subsistence into the full blessing of the Spirit-led experience, then this is the section you ought to be concerned with -- Israel's entrance into the land -- out of the wilderness and into Canaan. Chapters five through twenty-one cover Israel's conquest of the land through many battles and conflicts as they came into the land of promise. Chapters twenty-two through twenty-four, including many passages from Joshua's own lips, set before us the perils and dangers in the land that we must guard against in order to remain in the place of victory that the land represents.

The land of Canaan is a picture, as we have mentioned, of the Spirit-filled life -- the life that God intended for every Christian to live. There are no exceptions to this. The Spirit-filled life is not just for certain advanced saints, but is provided by God for every one of his people. Beginning in chapter one we have a marvelously descriptive picture of it:

"Moses my servant is dead; now therefore arise, go over this Jordan, you and all this people into the land which I am giving to them..." {Josh 1:2a RSV}

The land is given to the people of Israel, just as the life in Christ is made available to you absolutely without effort on your part. In the third verse you will notice that although the land has been given, it still needs to be possessed. Title to it is the gift of God; possession of it is the result of an obedient walk.

"Every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon I have given to you, as I promised to Moses." {Josh 1:3 RSV}

The idea is, you can have all that you will take. You can have every bit of the spiritual life that you want. You will never get any more. God will never give you more than you are ready to take. So if you are not satisfied with the degree of your real experience of victory, it is because you haven't really wanted any more. You can have all that you want. "Every place where the sole of your foot will tread upon I have given to you."

Then the land is described as abundant and far-reaching; a land in which you will find all you need, in every area of life; "a land flowing with milk and honey." (Ex. 3:8)

"From the wilderness and this Lebanon as far as the great river, the river Euphrates, all the land of the Hittites to the Great Sea toward the going down of the sun shall be your territory." {Josh 1:4 RSV}

But we find that it is also a land of both conflict and victory:

"No man shall be able to stand before you all the days of your life; as I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you." {Josh 1:5 RSV}

One of the first things we learn in coming into this place of walking in the Spirit is that although it is a place of conflict, every conflict can be a victory. There need not be any defeats. It is a frontier, if you like, and there is nothing more exciting than life on a frontier. This life is especially frontier living in the victory of Christ.

The secret of living in the land includes both a promise and a presence; an obedient heart and an empowering spirit. God said:

"Be strong and of good courage; for you shall cause this people to inherit the land which I swore to their fathers to give them. Only be strong and very courageous..." {Josh 1:6-7a RSV}

It is going to take courage. There can be no drifting aimlessly along with the crowd. You are going to have to walk against the current.

"...being careful to do according to all the law which Moses my servant commanded you; turn not from it to the right hand or to the left, that you may have good success wherever you go. This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it; for then you shall make your way prosperous, and then you shall have good success." {Josh 1:7b-8 RSV}

There is the greatness of the book of Joshua! There is the promise! The written word must be our constant, prescribed meditation and study so we may "know the truth and the truth shall set us free." (John 8:32)

"Have I not commanded you? Be strong and of good courage; be not frightened, neither be dismayed; for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go." {Josh 1:9 RSV}

And there is the accompanying presence of the Holy Spirit: an obedient heart brings an empowering spirit. That is life in the land.

In chapter two we have the remarkable and intriguing story of Rahab and the spies that were sent out by Israel. When these spies came into the house of Rahab, she hid them under some flax drying on the roof. While the men of the city were searching for them, the spies learned a most startling secret from Rahab:

"I know that the Lord has given you the land, and that the fear of you has fallen upon us, and that all the inhabitants of the land melt away before you. For we have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites that were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon and Og, whom you utterly destroyed. And as soon as we heard it, our hearts melted and there was no courage left in any man, because of you; for the Lord your God is he who is God in heaven above and on earth beneath, ..." {Josh 2:9-11 RSV}

How long before the spies entered into this city had these events taken place? Forty years. In other words, for forty years the inhabitants of Jericho had been a defeated foe. Their hearts were melted. They were defeated before the armies got anywhere close. Israel could have gone in at any time and taken the land. How long have you been waiting to enter in and take a defeated foe in your life?

Next we read of the spies:

They departed, and went into the hills, and remained there three days, until the pursuers returned; for the pursuers had made search all along the way and found nothing. Then the two men came down again from the hills, and passed over and came to Joshua the son of Nun; and they told him all that had befallen them. And they said to Joshua, "Truly the Lord has given all the land into our hands; and moreover all the inhabitants of the land are fainthearted because of us." {Josh 2:22-24 RSV}

After three days they came back and told this story. Notice the opening verse of chapter three. On the third day, "early in the morning," they prepared to go into the land. Here is a reminder to us that on the third day, early in the morning, the resurrection took place. And it is in resurrection power that they entered in to take the land of Canaan, picturing Christ in his risen life working in and through us to make us victors over all that defeats, hinders, and fetters us.

Between the Israelites and the land, however, there still flowed the Jordan River. This account of the crossing of the Jordan is very similar to the story of the crossing of the Red Sea. In many ways the two crossings picture the same thing: death. Any man venturing into the Red Sea without the waters having been parted would have gone to his death. So the crossing of these waters is a picture of death.

Now, as you may already know, the crossing of the Red Sea is a picture of Christ's death for you and me -- when he cuts us off from the world in all its attitudes, ways, and opinions. In other words, when you became a Christian, you changed your ideas and sense of values. Your baptism was an expression of the fact that you were passing out of one life into another, and that your whole attitude was changed. That was the Red Sea -- his death for you.

But the Jordan is a picture of your death with Christ, when you bring your Adamic life to an end; when all that you are in Adam comes to an end -- your reliance on yourself, your desire to have your own program, to live and make your own decisions. and set your own goals -- and you discover that you can't have his life with your program. If you want to hold onto your program, then you can have only your own, fallen Adamic life. But if you want his life, then you will also have his program, which is one of victory. You cross either the Red Sea or the Jordan River when you accept the principle involved in this. But crossing the Jordan is what you do when you let go of your own program, make up your mind, and say, "All right, if this is what you want for me Lord, this is what it will be." That is what happened with Israel when they went into the land.

You cross the Jordan the same way you crossed the Red Sea:

And the Lord said to Joshua, "This day I will begin to exalt you in the sight of all Israel, that they may know that, as I was with Moses, so I will be with you." {Josh 3:7 RSV}

By faith. That is all. By obedience and by faith. God is saying to Joshua, "By the same way I led Moses to bring Israel through the Red Sea, so I will lead you to bring Israel through the Jordan." The same way! You experience the life of Christ for every living moment in the very same way that you claimed the death of Christ for your sins. The faith that got you out of Egypt is the same faith that gets you into the land. As Paul writes: "As therefore you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so live in him." (Col. 2:6)

Was it any harder for Israel to cross the Jordan River than to cross the Red Sea? No, they just walked down, the waters rolled back, and they went right through. The same thing. No problems. And it is no different, you see, to walk into the land. It is simply believing that God is in you and that what he said about you is true -- that he has cut off the old life (you agreed to that) and he has given you a new basis that will work. You believe it and you walk out on that basis and say, "Thank you Lord. for being in me to do through me everything that needs to be done." And you enter the land.

In chapter four you read that two memorials were set up by Israel. One was twelve stones on the bank of the river for a continual reminder to them of the principle of faith to which they had now returned after years of wandering in the wilderness. I believe this memorial is representative of the Lord's Supper which is a continual reminder to us of that principle of life by which we are to live.

The other memorial was a series of twelve stones in the middle of the river which were to be placed where the priests stood while all of Israel passed over to the other side. The stones were put in place before the waters came back. This is a picture for us of how Jesus Christ stays in the place of death long enough for every area of our lives to pass out of the control of self and into the control of Christ.

In chapter five we come to the second section of the conquest of the land. What a mighty story this is! As the Israelites contemplated moving in to take possession of this land, they saw the tremendous city of Jericho with its huge walls. While Jericho was the first visible obstacle in their pathway, it was not the first thing that Israel had to deal with. They had something to do in their own lives first. God never begins his conquest with the outward problem. You will discover that he begins with you; you are the first problem.

There are three things that the people of Israel had to do before they could destroy the enemy in the land. First, they had to be circumcised. The whole generation that had been circumcised in Egypt had died in the wilderness. A whole new generation had grown up uncircumcised, so when they came into the land, the first act was circumcision. As we know from the New Testament circumcision is a picture of a surrendered heart -- a heart in which the reliance on the flesh has been put aside, cut off -- a circumcised heart. (Rom. 2:29)

The second thing they needed to do was to celebrate the Passover for the first time since they had come out of the wilderness. The Passover is a remembrance of the night when the Lord and the angel of death passed over the houses of the Israelites back in Egypt because they were protected by the sheltering blood of the lamb. It also pictures a thankful heart that looks back to that day of deliverance when Christ became our Passover sacrifice for us.

After their celebration of the Passover came a new food. The manna that had sustained them in the wilderness ceased on the day after they came into the land, and they began to eat of the satisfying corn and food of the land. As far as I can discover, the nearest thing that we have to manna today is cornflakes. How would you like cornflakes for breakfast, lunch and supper every day for forty years? They were plenty tired of cornflakes when they got into the land of Canaan. And in fact, it was never intended to be their food for forty years. They had fed on that which sustained their strength but never satisfied them. But when they came into the land, they found that which satisfies.

Finally, before their conquest began, Joshua had to plan the strategy for taking the city of Jericho. He must have been a perplexed and bewildered man. How could he take this huge, walled city with this "army" of people, untrained in battle. As he looked out in the moonlight over the city, he saw a man standing there with a drawn sword, and said to him, "Are you on our side or on the side of the enemy?" The man said, "No; but as commander of the army of the Lord I have now come." (Josh. 5:14) That is, "I haven't come to take sides but I have come to take over. It isn't your job to plan the strategy of battle. That is my job. I have given the city of Jericho into your hands." Then the man told Joshua the most remarkable battle plan that has ever been arranged. He was to have the people simply march around the city once a day for six days and on the seventh day, seven times; and then to blow a long blast on the trumpets and the walls would fall down. That was all there was to it.

As there were three preparations that needed to be made before engaging in battle. so in this section there are three major obstacles to be overcome before the land is won. These picture for us the three types of problems which confront us as we walk the Christian life. The first one is Jericho -- with walls about 300 feet thick and 60 feet high -- an immense fortress, and outward challenge, a seemingly insurmountable obstacle. It pictures for us those problems, most frequently occurring at the beginning of our experience of walking in the Spirit, when we are confronted by something that has baffled and mocked us for years. Maybe it is a habit that we have had for a long time and have never been able to overcome. Maybe it is a circumstance in which we live that is a constant threat to our spiritual life and nothing that we do seems to change it. It may be some situation in which we are placed, somebody that we have to work with, or some problem that seems absolutely insurmountable to us.

There is an amazing thing about this type of problem. When we follow the strategy outlined here -- simply walk around it, displaying the ark of God (the presence of God) while shouting and playing the trumpets as a

display of triumph -- the walls fall down. When there is a complete change of attitude towards a problem of this nature, the problem disappears. It isn't the visible obstacle that is the problem, but our attitude toward it; as soon as the attitude changes, the problem dissolves.

But God had Israel march around for seven days. Why that long? Well, it took them that long to change their attitude toward Jericho. All that time they were thinking "What a huge place. How will we ever take this place? What an absolutely insurmountable fortress." Day after day, while walking around this city, they had time to think about God in their midst, the power that he had displayed, and what he could do. Gradually their attitude changed so that on the seventh day they shouted in triumph and the walls fell down. There was nothing to it when they obeyed.

The second obstacle in their path is the little city of Ai; but first, there is the story of the sin of Achan. He coveted something that was forbidden. He took it and hid it and when they went up against Ai, Israel was utterly defeated. Joshua fell upon his face before the Lord and said, "What is the reason for this?" (Josh. 7:7) God said to him, "Joshua, get up off your face. Don't pray to me now. There is sin in the camp. Go search it out." Finally, after searching through all the ranks of Israel, they filtered down to Achan and his family and Achan confessed.

Ai, then, is a beautiful picture for us of those inward problems arising out of our own lusts for that which God says we cannot, and must not have. We play the hypocrite and then discover that we are prey to every evil force that comes our way. We have no power to stand. We experience failure and defeat, as Israel did. But the minute this sin was confessed, they went up to Ai and it was no longer a problem. It was a battle, but no problem. Through it, they gained victory over the problem of the flesh.

The two battles of Gibeon and Beth-horon comprise a third picture for us of the special attacks of Satan upon the believer. Gibeon is the story of deception. The Gibeonites dressed themselves up in old clothes, took old moldy bread and tattered wine skins, and rode emaciated donkeys out to meet Joshua. (Josh. 9:3 ff) When Joshua met them, he said, "Where are you from?" "Oh," they said, "we are from a country far away. We have heard of the mighty prowess of Israel and we have come over to make a treaty with you." Joshua said, "How do I know that you are what you claim to be?" They said, "Well, look. Look here at our provisions. We took this bread fresh from the oven just when we left, and look how moldy and dry it is. And our clothes -- how ragged and tattered they are. We have traveled so far that our donkeys are all worn out." Joshua believed them and made a pact with them. When they had signed the treaty, Israel walked over the hill and there was Gibeon! They had been trapped and deceived by an angel of light -- by a Satanic deception which appeared to be right, and good, and trustworthy, but was not. They had to stick by their treaty and spare the Gibeonites, and as a result, the Gibeonites became thorns in their side throughout the rest of Israel's history. That is the story of Gibeon, the angel of light.

Then comes the account of Beth-horon when all the kings of the Canaanites banded together and came roaring down in a tremendous league of nations against Joshua. It was a mighty battle, and although Israel was greatly outnumbered, God gave the victory in the remarkable manner of arresting the sun in its flight, thus making the day of battle to last until victory came -- the long day of Joshua.

Here is a picture of what happens when the devil comes as a roaring lion in some overwhelming catastrophe that seems to shatter us, to shake our faith, and make us cry out, "God, what is happening to me? Why should this happen to me?" And we seem to be swept off our feet by this terrible, staggering thing. But Joshua stood fast in faith, depending upon God to simply work a miracle. And God worked a miracle. "The righteous will never be moved," we are told. (Prov. 10:30) This is why Paul tells us in Ephesians that when the enemy comes like this, we are to just stand still -- that is all -- stand on the promises of God and the enemy will be defeated. (Eph. 6:13)

The rest of this section (chapters 11 through 21) is simply a mopping up operation. After the battle of Beth-horon, the land was practically theirs, although there were individual victories. The victories of Caleb, Othniel and the Josephites and the setting aside of the cities of refuge all contain wonderful lessons of the audacity of faith -- taking what God has promised and using it in individual lives.

In the last section we learn of the perils that beset us, how to stay in the land, and certain particular hazards. They are threefold. First of all comes the account of the misunderstood motives that were ascribed to the Reubenites, the Gadites and half-tribe of Manasseh. They built an altar on the wrong side of the Jordan, causing indignation among the other tribes of Israel. To them, this was idolatry and disobedience to God's command. So they gathered themselves together and came to make war against their own brethren. When they got there, the Reubenites, the Gadites and half-tribe of Manasseh were tremendously upset. They cried out, "Before God, this is not a rebellion. Let us explain." (22:23) Then they explained that they were afraid that some time in the future the Israelites in the land might say to the tribes outside the land, "What have you to do with the Lord our God? God has made the boundary here at the Jordan River. You don't belong to us. You are outside our nation." So they said, "We have built this altar not for worship or sacrifice, but simply to remind us that we belong with the people on the other side of Jordan." (vs. 28) It is a wonderful picture for us of the peril of improper criticism, of ascribing wrong motives to people. If there is anything that will drive us out of the land of victory, it is to become engaged in a controversy over misunderstood motives.

The second peril is incomplete obedience. Although the land had been given to the people of Israel, they did not possess all of it, but left some of it unconquered. As Joshua warns the people as he nears the end of his life, the uncaptured people whom they permitted to live were to become snares and thorns to them throughout the rest of their history. (23:12, 13)

Finally, Joshua appeared before the people with a great message challenging them to walk before the Lord their God, saying, "Choose this day whom you will serve." (24:15) He is saying: "You think you can go on in a sort of neutral position between following the devil and following the Lord. You can't do it." This is exactly what Jesus said, "No one can serve two masters." (Matt. 6:24) You must serve either God or Satan. You cannot serve both. There is no intermediate ground. Here is Israel's response:

Then the people answered: "Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord, to serve other gods; for it is the Lord our God who brought us and our fathers up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage, and who did those great signs in our sight, and preserved us in all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed; and the Lord drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land; therefore we also will serve the Lord, for he is our God." {Josh 24:16-18 RSV}

Brave sounding words.

But Joshua said to the people, "You cannot serve the Lord;" {Josh 24:19a RSV}

You cannot do it. The greatest peril of all in the Christian faith is false confidence. You say, "Well, certainly I can do what God wants. I've got what it takes. After all, I know the scriptures. I have been raised in the right church. I can certainly walk faithfully and honestly before God. Don't talk to me about apostasy, defeat, back-sliding. I can serve the Lord." Joshua says, "You cannot serve God."

This greatest lesson of the spiritual life is that you have no strength in yourself to stand, no matter how long you have walked before God. You can never have a moment of strength to stand by yourself. Your strength comes out of weakness and your sense of dependence. Your sense of your constant need of God's strength is the only thing that will keep you. Joshua, the wise old man that he was, said:

"You cannot serve the Lord; for he is a holy God; he is a jealous God; ... If you forsake the Lord and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm, and consume you, after having done you good." {Josh 24:19a, 24:20 RSV}

But the people said, "No, Joshua, you don't know what you are talking about. We are going to serve the Lord anyway." That is why the next book, the book of Judges, is the book of defeat.

Prayer:

Our heavenly Father, what marvels of knowledge and wisdom are wrapped up in this

remarkable book that you have given to us and how inconceivably poverty stricken we are because we do not know it. We neglect it. We do not listen to it. How we stumble on from defeat to defeat in bitter disillusionment, often scarcely realizing what the reason is because we are so woefully untaught by the Spirit. Teach us now to open the book and ask the blessed Holy Spirit himself to make it real to us that we may understand it, grasp it and walk in the strength of it, for we pray in Christ's name. Amen.

Title: Joshua: Guidebook to Victory
By: Ray C. Stedman
Series: Adventuring through the Bible
Scripture: Joshua
Message No: 6
Catalog No: 206
Date: December 13, 1964

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