



DEFINING SUCCESS

Joshua 1

Joshua had an enormous task ahead of him in conquering the promised land, but he also had a great God with him, and that is the key to true success and prosperity. Joshua would prove to be a military genius, but more importantly, he would prove to be a man of God.

We now begin our journey through the book of Joshua. Joshua is the first of twelve books in the Old Testament that recount Israel's history, and it tells us how God directed and protected the Israelites, getting them out of the wilderness and into the promised land.

Even though the Israelites were given the land of Canaan as the covenant promise from God, they still had to go in and conquer it. The idolatrous nations that lived there hated Yahweh and the people of God, and they were not just going to roll over and say, "Come on in." And that's why the book of Joshua can be divided into three major military campaigns.

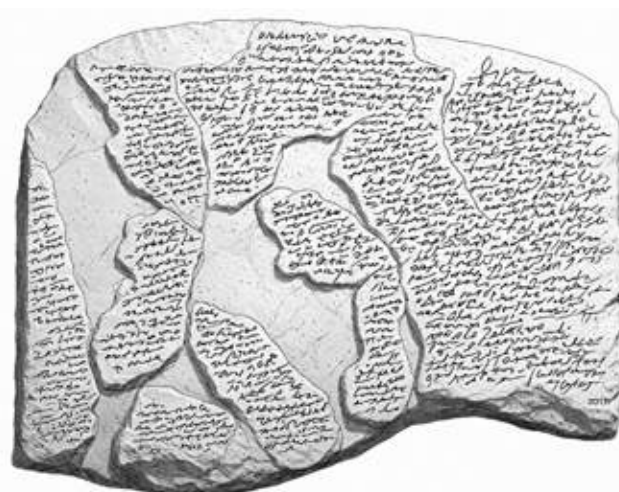
You might actually have something Joshua said, framed and hanging in your house like we do in our home: "As for me and my house, we will serve the LORD." Well, Joshua said that in chapter 24 when he was right around a hundred years old; that was the motto of his life.

Beloved, when you get out of bed in the morning, if this is already settled in your heart—that you and your house will serve the Lord—well then, every other decision facing you has already been settled. God is in charge of your day because God is in charge of you.

Now as chapter 1 opens, Joshua is commissioned by God to take the nation Israel into the promised land. God says to him in verse 2:

"Moses my servant is dead. 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."

And in verse 5 the Lord offers this assurance:



Treaty between Hittites and Egyptians concluded after the battle of Kadesh



“No man shall be able to stand before you all the days of your life. Just as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will not leave you or forsake you.”

Now four times in chapter 1 you can underline God’s words to Joshua, “Be strong and courageous.” And they are repeated probably because Joshua is intimidated by this assignment. He’s not just a young spy returning with a positive report like he did forty years earlier; now he’s the commanding general, and he’s probably wondering if the people will even follow him.

Well fortunately, here in verse 17, the people respond by saying, “Just as we obeyed Moses in all things, so we will obey you.” Now I don’t find that reassuring at all, because they did not obey Moses in all things! They complained and disobeyed Moses like a roomful of three-year-olds.

That is why the promise from God back in verse 5 is so meaningful: “Just as I was with Moses, so I will be with you.” It’s as if God says to Joshua, “Look, the people you’re leading will fail you, but I will never leave you.”

That same promise has been given to you today, beloved; the Lord says in Hebrews 13:5, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.”

*Hebrews 13:5,
“I will never leave
you nor forsake you.”*

Now Joshua is facing seven enemy nations in the promised land. These nations are collectively referred to as Canaanites. Tucked inside that term *Canaanites* you have all the “ites”—the Hittites, the Jebusites, the Amorites, the Moabites, and all the other mos-

quito bites. They will try to suck the blood out of Israel from morning until night.

I am often asked why God tells Israel to destroy these Canaanite nations. Is God being cruel to these people? To answer this, you have to go back to Genesis chapter 9, where Noah pronounces a curse on Canaan, who will go on to become the father of the Canaanites. This curse was prophetic because God knew what the Canaanites would become—seven immoral, brutal, child-sacrificing, demon-worshipping, warrior nations.

When Israel went in to claim their inheritance, they were also acting as the instrument of God’s judgment. People say to me today, “The God of the Old Testament was cruel, but the God of the New Testament is kind.” Well, they haven’t read the New Testament evidently. It ends with a final judgment of every person who has ever lived and refused to follow God. After that judgment, Revelation chapter 20 informs us, they are cast into an eternal hell. Listen, what you are seeing here in the book of Joshua is God’s judgment on sin, and it’s a strong warning of that future, final judgment on all who defy God and His Word.

If you had just been told you are about to go into a land where these seven wicked nations are waiting, wouldn’t you want to know what your chances were? Well, God gives Joshua some reassurance here in verses 7 and 8, where God promises him that he will have “success” and be “prosperous.”

Success and *prosperity* are defined in the Word of God very differently from how we usually define them. If someone is successful today, that means he’s got more room in his garage than most people have in their homes, along with some impressive title at work.

But when the Bible defines success, it has nothing to do with your paycheck—it has everything to do with your priorities. Let me tell you, I’ve met a lot of poor Christians in different parts of the world, but in the eyes of God, they were successful and prosperous.

Joshua is told here to make three decisions that will bring him true success. And making these three decisions will do the same for us today.



First, Joshua has to decide to *obey God's Word*. God says to Joshua in verse 7:

Only be strong and very courageous, being careful to do according to all the law that Moses my servant commanded you. Do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, that you may have good success wherever you go.

Joshua probably had watched Moses writing out these first five books of the Old Testament—the Torah. Torah is the Hebrew word for “teaching.” These books are also called the Pentateuch. Penta means “five” in the Greek language, and teuchos means “book”; so, the Pentateuch is the first five books of the Old Testament.

Keep in mind that when God tells Joshua to obey “this book,” this is all Joshua has—the Pentateuch. He can’t have devotions from the book of Psalms or Isaiah or Romans or the Gospel of John. But the Book he has—the Bible he has, if you please—is enough to give him a successful life.

The second decision Joshua has to make is to *communicate God's Word*. We read in verse 8: “This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth.” This means it must always be on his lips. You see, it was the responsibility of Israel’s leaders to read these five books to the nation every seven years. Imagine sitting through that sermon! Joshua was to continue this practice.

Beloved, do you want to be successful in life? Well, how long does it take before your family, friends, classmates, or coworkers hear something from your mouth that communicates the truth of God’s Word?

The third decision that leads to biblical success is to *meditate on God's Word*. In verse 8, God tells Joshua

to “meditate on it day and night.” The Hebrew word here for “meditate” means “to murmur,” or “to ponder.” Like a cow out there in the pasture chewing its cud, we need to be mentally chewing on the Word of God throughout the day.

That is true success—obeying God’s Word, communicating God’s Word, and meditating on God’s Word throughout the day. Let’s decide to do that today.

How is your faith encouraged knowing God is always present with every true believer? How is your thought life and your choices impacted by this same truth about God’s presence? Read Psalm 139 to shore up your confidence and convictions in this area of your life.

Consider this: how has the world shaped your concept of success? How does Colossians 3:1-6 affect your pursuit of anything rooted in the world’s way of thinking? Choose several biblical characters and study their lives in God’s word to further remind you of who defines and where the foundation of success can be found.

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A SURPRISING CONVERSION

Joshua 2

Faith is sometimes found in unexpected places. Rahab was living a wicked life among wicked people, but the grace of God reached her in a most amazing way. Her faith in Israel's God would preserve her from the judgment of God upon her city.

The book of Joshua is a book of battles, as the children of Israel enter the promised land of Canaan. And it's not going to be easy. The Canaanite people are by this time defiant nations. God had given them plenty of time to repent of their idolatry and immorality and follow Him as creator God. In fact, God had given them forty years to repent after they learned that Israel had miraculously crossed the Red Sea and were heading their way.

But the Canaanites are determined to fight God's chosen people to the bitter end. And Israel is about to serve as God's instrument of judgment. As we come to Joshua chapter 2, Israel is preparing for battle; and this is going to be a big one—they are going to march against the fortress city of Jericho.

We are told in the New Testament that the history of Israel was recorded to teach us how to live by faith (1 Corinthians 10:11; Hebrews 12:1). So, as we work through this chapter, let me give you some timeless principles for New Testament Christians today.

First, *we need to prepare for battle even though God has promised us the ultimate victory.* God had already told Joshua in chapter 1, "The LORD your God . . . will give you this land" (verse 13).



Jericho

Victory was already guaranteed. So, Joshua could relax, right? No, he prepares for the battle. Here in chapter 2, we read that Joshua "sent two men secretly . . . as spies, saying, 'Go, view the land, especially Jericho'" (verse 1). You see, Jericho is the front door into the land of Canaan; so these men are going to go check it out.

Joshua is an illustration of New Testament soldiers. We are to put on the armor of God. We're in a spiritual battle against ideologies and false religions; we don't battle with guns and bombs but with truth, using "the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" (Ephesians 6:17). So, let's be prepared, even



though God has promised us the ultimate victory through Christ.

Second, *we need to remember that God includes the most unlikely people in His plans.* Verse 1 goes on to tell us that the two spies entered the city of Jericho and eventually camped out that night in “the house of a prostitute whose name was Rahab.” Why would they hide out in a brothel? For one thing, that would be the last place anybody would ask their names.

The Hebrew word for prostitute is *zonah*, which can be translated either “prostitute” or “innkeeper.”¹ Some have tried to soften the edges of this account by suggesting that Rahab was simply an innkeeper. But the New Testament passages that describe Rahab (Hebrews 11; James 2) use the Greek word *pornē*, which means “fornicator.” Let me tell you, Rahab is not running a motel.

We are told here that these spies had been detected. The king has his own spies, and they had watched these Israelites make their way to Rahab’s brothel. So, when it grows dark, the king sends soldiers to capture them, but Rahab has already hidden them.

When the king’s men knock on her door, Rahab says in verse 4:

“The men came to me, but I did not know where they were from. And when the gate was about to be closed at dark, the men went out. I do not know where the men went.”

Now Rahab just told one lie after another, didn’t she? And this brings up another timeless principle: *We need to carefully distinguish what the Bible reports from what the Bible recommends.*

Many people have been confused that God would use Rahab when she lied. But you will notice the Bible does not commend her for lying. By the way, the Bible doesn’t recommend that you spend the night in a brothel either. It simply records what happened, without any comment.

Now it’s possible God would have done something miraculous to make these men invisible had Rahab told the truth. God didn’t depend on her lying; He simply records it.

After the soldiers leave, Rahab goes upstairs to where she has hidden the spies, and I want you to notice her surprising testimony to these two men:

“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 . . . our hearts melted, and there was no spirit left in any man because of you.”

(verses 9-11)

Let me add a fourth principle here: *We often underestimate what God is doing in the hearts of unbelievers.* Who would have imagined that the Canaanites had been terrified of Israel for the past forty years? All that time the Israelites were convinced they were grasshoppers compared to these Canaanite warriors, while the Canaanites were shaking in their boots.

And look at what had happened to Rahab. She says in verse 11, “For the LORD your God, he is God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath.” In other words, “I believe your God is the true and living God.” Wow, they didn’t expect that!

With that testimony of her faith, the spies promise to protect her and her family when Jericho is conquered. They tell her to tie a scarlet cord in the window to identify her house when the Israelites enter the city.



The Hebrew word for “cord” here in verse 18 is *tiqvah*, translated often in the Old Testament with the word *hope*. So, Rahab is literally flying the banner of hope that God will rescue her and forgive her and keep her from judgment and death.

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Let me give one final principle here: *Past sin does not erase the potential of future blessing.* Two of the three times Rahab is mentioned in the New Testament, she is referred to as “Rahab the harlot.” God evidently wants to remind us of her sinful past so that He can highlight the beauty of His grace.

I preached in a rally in Colombia, and after the service a woman came to the platform. I was told later she was a well-known prostitute in that city, on the payroll of a drug cartel. Through a translator this woman told me that a friend had invited her to attend that night; and with tears streaming down her cheeks, she told me she had given her life to Jesus Christ. Oh, she had a past, but let me tell you, she now had a future!

Rahab will be rescued and go on to marry an Israelite man name Salmon; they have a baby boy they name Boaz. Boaz grows up and, just like his father,

he marries a former Gentile idolater who chose to follow God; her name is Ruth. Both Rahab and Ruth are included in the family tree of the Messiah, Jesus Christ, recorded in Matthew chapter 1.

What about you? Have you been rescued by the grace of God? “Oh, but Stephen you don’t know my past. You don’t know my sin.” I don’t, but God does, and He sent His son to die for every one of your sins.

Just hang that banner of hope out the window of your heart—hope in Christ alone. And God will forgive you and save you and make you a member of His family tree.

God promises victory, but believers must prepare (Ephesians 6:10-18).

Practically, how do you prepare yourself spiritually each day to serve and sometimes battle along with God? How can couples prepare? Parents with their children? Friends or co-workers with each other?

What heart attitudes or habits in believers lead them to underestimate what God is doing in the hearts of unbelievers? What spiritual disciplines or truths have the potential to reverse those assumptions? What role does Satan play in this spiritual reality of underestimating God?

¹ Dale Ralph Davis, *No Falling Words: Expositions of the Book of Joshua* (Christian Focus, 2012), 29.





CROSSING THE JORDAN

Joshua 3:1–5:12

It's not necessarily the most talented or brilliant people God uses; it's those who humbly examine themselves, confess their sins, and walk in holiness and faith. The preparation of Israel for the conquest of Canaan serves as an apt example of this important principle.

We now come in our journey to Joshua chapter 3. Here we find the people of Israel camping beside the Jordan River, preparing to enter the land of Canaan.

You might expect Joshua to tell the people to sharpen their swords, but instead, he says here in verse 5, "Consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow the LORD will do wonders among you." Old Testament consecration could include washing their clothes and taking a bath, but it symbolized self-examination and confession of sin.

The principle here is timeless: maybe the reason we don't see God's power as much as we could is because

we aren't consecrated, pure vessels. God doesn't need clever people; He wants clean people.

Now as the Jordan River flows from the Sea of Galilee all the way down to the Dead Sea, it descends several hundred feet, producing a natural current. During the flood season in the spring, it overflows its banks up to a mile wide—and it's now spring.

So, the Israelites aren't camping out by a little stream of water; they're next to a wide, rushing river. Most of these people had not seen God part the waters of the Red Sea forty years earlier in Egypt, and I'm sure they're wondering how God is going to get them across the Jordan River.

Joshua then speaks to the nation:

"Here is how you shall know that the living God is among you and that he will without fail drive out from before you the Canaanites . . . When the soles of the feet of the priests bearing the ark of the LORD, the Lord of all the earth, shall rest in the wa-



Procession of priests from Medinet Habu



ters of the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan shall be cut off from flowing, and the waters coming down from above shall stand in one heap.” (verses 10, 13)

The priests are carrying the ark of the covenant, a gold-covered box about two feet by four feet, containing the rod of Aaron, a jar of manna, and the stone tablets of the law. The ark, you notice, is leading the way.

Note also that God promised to stop the rushing current of the Jordan River only *after* the feet of the priests step into the water. These priests are probably praying, “Lord, if you don’t do something miraculous, we’re sunk—literally!”

Verse 15-17 describe what happens next:

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 . . . the waters coming down from above stood and rose up in a heap very far away . . . and all Israel was passing over on dry ground until all the nation finished passing over the Jordan.

It’s as if an invisible hand has stopped the water from flowing downriver. A mountain of water starts piling up, higher and higher and higher, creating a dry path below it for the people of Israel to walk across.

Now so-called scholars have to dance all around this miraculous event in order to deny it. But they have a lot of trouble doing that because the Bible is so clear.

1. This took place when the Jordan was at flood stage—a rushing river (verse 15).

2. The waters were stopped with perfect timing—right when the priests’ feet touched the water’s edge (verse 16).
3. The wall of water was held in place while the entire nation crossed (verse 17).
4. The soft river bottom immediately became dry (verse 17).
5. The waters returned as soon as Israel crossed the Jordan (4:18).

There is no reason to doubt this literal event, where God performed an amazing act of divine power.

By the way, the Jordan River literally becomes the first step as Israel begins their public journey into the promised land. Likewise, it’s in the Jordan River that Jesus will be baptized, marking the first step in His public ministry, which completes the plan of salvation so that we can all one day enter the promised land of heaven.

Now this miracle here at the Jordan River not only encourages Israel; it also warns the Canaanite nations to throw down their arms and pursue peace with the true and living God. This, of course, they will refuse to do.

In chapter 4, Joshua commands that twelve stones be taken from the middle of the Jordan River and brought to the other side. They will be used to create a national memorial, a permanent reminder of God’s provision.

God knows one of our greatest enemies is a bad spiritual memory. We question God’s presence because we forget what He has done in the past. So, Joshua says in verses 21-23:

“When your children ask their fathers in times to come, ‘What do these stones mean?’ then you shall let your children know, ‘Israel passed over this Jordan on dry ground.’ . . . as the LORD your God did to the Red Sea, which he dried up for us until we passed over.”



You ought to keep a mental trophy case for memories of God's provision. When my wife and I were first married and I began my seminary training, we were as poor as church mice. One month we simply didn't have the money to pay the next month's rent. Our landlord was a believer, and the day before our rent was due, he called us on the telephone to tell us that God was impressing on his heart to not charge us rent for that coming month. Let me tell you, for us that was like crossing the Jordan River.

What are your children and grandchildren hearing from you, by the way? Do you have a trophy case of memories of God's faithfulness?

You would think the Israelites would move forward with an attack on Jericho. But instead, two events here in Joshua chapter 5 will slow them down.

First, Joshua reinstates the covenant practice of circumcision. In the first nine verses, we read that all the men of Israel are circumcised—this was the symbol of Israel's covenant relationship with God. They had grown up for forty years, following their disobedient parents around the wilderness, and none of them had been circumcised.

Verse 8 tells us that “they remained in their places in the camp until they were healed.” Here they are, poised to attack Jericho, and God effectively says, “Not so fast; that might be the right military move, but it's not the right spiritual move.” God is more interested in your relationship *with* Him than one more accomplishment *for* Him. We often get carried away with our accomplishments, when God desires a relationship.

The second delay we find in verse 10: “They kept the Passover on the fourteenth day of the month in the evening on the plains of Jericho.” Passover is the remembrance of the nation's deliverance from Egypt following the tenth and final plague. They would kill, roast, and eat a lamb and remember the grace of God in their lives.

Now if there were spies from the city of Jericho watching them, they must have run back to tell the

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plishment for Him.*

strange news that Israel is out there having some kind of national barbecue. Of course, it is far more than that. God wants Israel to remember His power over Egypt before they experience His power over Jericho. And the battle of Jericho is just ahead.

What big decision with even bigger implications are you facing? Some pondering on the riverbanks is wise, but why do we believers sometimes hesitate to act when God has already promised His presence and His provision? How is the priests' example helpful in your case?

What are some of the typical ways Satan tempts you to measure your relationship with God by your *doing for* God rather than being with God? What choice does Joshua make in order to keep the nation in proper balance? In what ways is obedience to God's word a shield against Satan's temptations?

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THE BATTLE OF JERICH0

Joshua 5:13–6:27

The first obstacle the Israelites had to overcome as they entered the promised land was the mighty fortress of Jericho. The divine plan for conquering this city was unique and serves as a continuing reminder to us that God alone deserves the glory for all our victories.

The people of Israel are now in the land of Canaan. And Joshua has done his homework in surveying the land. This is a land of city-states. Each city is an independent kingdom, with its own king. Conquering one city will not topple all the others like dominoes; the Israelites have to conquer them all.

And the first city they must conquer—the front door into Canaan—is the city of Jericho. Archeological digs reveal that Jericho was surrounded by a set of double walls. One wall was built around the city proper, and then there were several acres of land running down a slope to another, outer wall. Poor people built homes on that outer slope of ground between the walls and against the outer wall. This is where Rahab's home was built—against the outer wall—according to chapter 2.

Archaeologists also have discovered the remains of bricks that have tumbled down into heaps at the base of these ancient city walls, and we're about to be told how it happened.

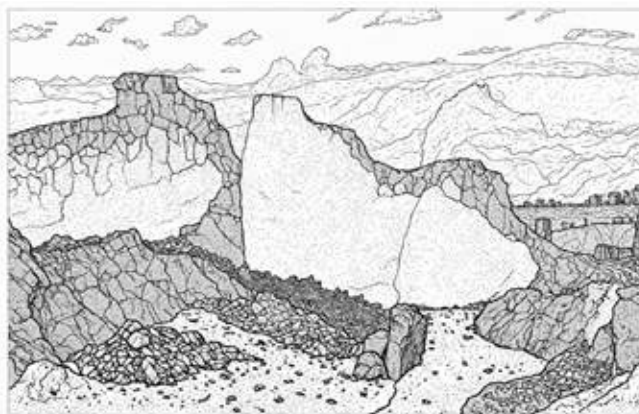
Here in Joshua chapter 5, we read at verse 13:

When Joshua was by Jericho, he lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, a man was standing be-

fore him with his drawn sword in his hand. And Joshua went to him and said to him, “Are you for us, or for our adversaries?”

The man responds in verse 14:

“No; but I am the commander of the army of the LORD. Now I have come.” And Joshua fell on his face to the earth and worshiped and said to him, “What does my lord say to his servant?”



Remains of the earlier Middle Bronze walls



Now this man is not an angel because an angel would not have allowed himself to be worshiped. This is what we call a *Christophany*, a preincarnate appearance of God the Son. He appears in the form of a warrior, and He reveals some interesting truths to Joshua.

Here's the first truth: *This isn't Joshua's battle; it's God's battle.* When the Lord says here, "I am the commander of the army of the LORD," He's not referring to the army of Israel with their little swords and sling-shots; He's referring to the host of heavenly angels.

The second truth the Lord reveals is this: *He isn't on Joshua's side, but Joshua needs to be on His side.* Again, in verse 13, Joshua asks this Warrior, "Are you for us, or for our adversaries?" And he said, "No," which can be translated, "Neither."

God isn't so much on *anybody's* side; the point is, you'd better be on *His* side. God isn't hoping somebody will let Him be on their team; you better be on *His* team.

In verse 15 the Lord says to Joshua, "Take off your sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy." Here's the third truth the Lord reveals: *The place where you battle is holy ground.*

We tend to think of the church as holy ground; people want to be buried in the church graveyard because that is supposedly sacred ground. God says here, "No, that place where you do battle for My glory happens to be sacred ground." That office where you work and live for Christ is holy ground; that classroom is holy ground; that kitchen is sacred ground. Wherever you face the daily battles of life—where God can be honored and obeyed—that is holy ground.

Now we are given some details here in chapter 6 and verse 1: "Now Jericho was shut up inside and outside because of the people of Israel. None went out, and none came in." In other words, humanly, there is no way Israel can defeat Jericho. Those thirty-foot-high gates with iron frames and iron hinges are bolted shut. I've seen remnants of ancient city gates like these that have been excavated—the Israelites aren't just going to push them open.

In verse 2 we read: "And the LORD said to Joshua, 'See, I have given Jericho into your hand.'" If I had been Joshua, I would have said, "Well, I don't see *anything*."

And then the Lord gives Joshua a strange battle plan:

"You shall march around the city, all the men of war going around the city once. Thus shall you do for six days. Seven priests shall bear seven trumpets of rams' horns before the ark. On the seventh day you shall march around the city seven times, and the priests shall blow the trumpets. And when they make a long blast with the ram's horn, when you hear the sound of the trumpet, then all the people shall shout with a great shout, and the wall of the city will fall down flat." (verses 3-5)

That's the plan? Can you imagine Joshua repeating this battle plan to his people? Circle the city once a day and then on the seventh day, march around it seven times with seven priests blowing on seven trumpets—that number seven represents completeness—and that will do it.

Let me tell you, this battle plan is a lesson in humility. They are not going to do anything of any military significance. They won't be able to take any credit for the coming victory, and that's the point. God is their strength and victory.

This battle plan requires humility but also obedience. We know from archeological discoveries that this city would have taken less than an hour to march around. Every day, the children of Israel are going to march around this city for an hour and then return to their camp while the city's walls remain standing.

What kind of plan is this? They are to obey, even though they do not understand. Perhaps this is where you are at today—obeying God and walking with God, even though you don't always fully understand His plan.



Another interesting aspect of God's plan is that they are to remain silent as they march around the city. Notice Joshua's command in verse 10: "You shall not shout or make your voice heard, neither shall any word go out of your mouth."

It's one thing to obey the will of God and yet complain about it; it's another thing to obey and remain silent. God is saying, "Be still, and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10). Trust Him.

The only noise is going to be the sound of the rams' horns. By the way, the ram's horn was sounded on special occasions to mark the presence of God. Clearly, this is God's battle.

By the end of the seventh day, the Israelites have walked around this city thirteen times; they have spent at least thirteen hours studying these massive walls. Maybe God knew it would take that long for them to realize they could not overcome the fortress city of Jericho.

The principle is true to this very day: victory in the Christian life is not difficult; it's impossible. Without the Spirit of God and the power of God, the battle is too great.

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Now look at verse 20:

As soon as the people heard the sound of the trumpet, the people shouted a great shout, and the wall fell down flat, so that the people went up into the city, every man straight before him, and they captured the city.

Rahab's house, built against a portion of the outer wall, stays intact, allowing her and her family to escape, as they had been promised.

So, here is Israel at the doorway into the promised land, given an unforgettable lesson. Jeremiah 32:27 puts it this way: "I am the LORD, the God of all flesh. Is anything too hard for me?"

Let's walk with the Lord—in humility, with silent surrender, giving Him all the glory—one day at a time.

If you asked your yet to be saved friends if they think you're on God's team, what would they say? Why do we as believers sometimes choose to serve on a "team" other than God's? How does valuing holiness impact your choice of whose team you'll be on?

What does God understand about the human heart that drives Him to emphasize humility in believers? When we resist God's teaching us humility, how does that affect God's reputation and our usefulness in serving His interests?

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SECRET SINS

Joshua 7-8

One spiritual victory does not guarantee another. Israel's great victory at Jericho was followed by a humiliating defeat. The God of Israel did not fail; the people failed. Spiritual successes are not occasions to lower our guard but reminders to renew our commitment to the Lord.

Today we move from the great victory over Jericho into the dismal swamp of defeat at Ai. The opening words in Joshua chapter 7 immediately spell trouble:

But the people of Israel broke faith in regard to the devoted things, for Achan . . . took some of the devoted things. And the anger of the LORD burned against the people of Israel.

Earlier in chapter 6, the people had been told that all the treasures of Jericho were to go into the treasury of the Lord. Everything else was to be destroyed in judgment. The city of Jericho was, in a very real sense, the firstfruits offering of the land to God.

When we begin chapter 7, we know something Joshua doesn't know yet. We're told in verse 1 that Achan has stolen from Jericho some things for himself. As a result of that sin, God removes His protection in battle, and as recorded in verses 2 through 5, Israel is surprisingly defeated at the city of Ai.



A Hittite prayer of Murshili II

Now you need to understand that Israel was defeated at Ai because Joshua and the entire nation were so self-confident they didn't even bother to ask for



God's help. Had they done so, they would have been made aware of Achan's sin. But we have no record in Scripture that Joshua went to the Lord before battling the army of Ai. That's like you and me starting our day without even talking with the Lord. It's very dangerous to underestimate the enemy and overestimate our own strength.

*It's very dangerous
to underestimate
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overestimate our
own strength.*

Let me make some practical observations as we work through this passage and apply them to the believer today. The first one is this: *the believer is vulnerable to temptation following some spiritual success.*

It's easy to get a false impression after a victory that you can coast, that you can let down your guard, rather than remain alert and prayerful and humble. The apostle Paul warned the believer in 1 Corinthians 10:12 to take heed—be careful—while you are standing, lest you fall.

After the great victory at Jericho, the Israelites are thinking that Ai's going to be a piece of cake. Just send a couple thousand men over there and clean it out.

The second observation is this: *the disobedience of one individual can have a profound effect on the entire community.* Verse 1 says that "the people of Israel broke faith." But wasn't it Achan who sinned? Look down at verse 11, where the Lord says, "Israel has sinned; they have transgressed . . . they have taken some of the devoted things."

You see, from God's perspective the entire nation is impacted by this one man's actions. There is this principle at work that your sin and mine truly affects other people around us. One person's secret sin can lower

the spiritual temperature of a church body, influencing and hurting the church's overall testimony. We impact each other—probably more than we think.

Now Achan had taken some clothing and some money and hidden it in his tent, which lets us know his entire family is part of the plot. I wonder today if you have something hidden in your computer files. Maybe there's someone at work you're getting close to and you think it isn't going to hurt anybody.

Achan's sin was nothing less than idolatry. He wanted something God told him he couldn't have. And anytime you want something or someone that God has forbidden, you're making that object or that person an idol—you're setting God aside in favor of something else.

Paul says in the New Testament book of Colossians that covetousness is idolatry (3:5). That gold and that clothing became more important to Achan than God. And that's idolatry—when something becomes more important to you than God.

Let me tell you, we live in a covetous world. Every commercial and advertisement strikes a chord with our desires for more; idols are everywhere. And the problem is, covetousness isn't just dangerous; it's contagious.

What is God's judgment on Achan for his idolatry? The same as it is today: the wages of sin is death. It might not happen as soon or as quickly as it will here in Israel during these covenant days in the Old Testament, but ultimately, God will judge every one of us; and without Christ paying the penalty for our idolatry, we don't have a chance before a holy God.

Now Joshua has to figure out who brought God's judgment on Israel because nobody's confessing to it. So, according to God's instructions, Joshua begins to cast lots in verse 16 to identify the tribe, the clan, the family, and finally the guilty individual.

Why does God choose this rather slow method? I believe He does it to impress upon the entire nation the seriousness of sin. Every tribe must stand there, and all the people are going to be thinking, *Am I right with God?* This long process causes every individual in the nation to consider his or her relationship with God.



But it also gives Achan an opportunity to confess and repent. So, as each lot is cast and the choice narrows to his tribe and then to the clan of Zerah, it's getting a little closer. Then the lot identifies his grandfather, Zabdi, and then his father, Carmi. Will Achan step forward now and repent? Not at all. He's going to wait until the lot points to him and his back is against the wall. But even then, he is merely remorseful and not repentant. Remorse is feeling badly because you get caught; repentance is feeling badly because you sinned in the first place and turning away from that sin.

So Joshua sent messengers, and they ran to [Achan's] tent; and behold, it was hidden in his tent with the silver underneath. And they took them out of the tent and brought them to Joshua and to all the people of Israel. (verses 22-23)

We know from verse 25 that Achan and his entire family are given the death penalty from God.

Keep in mind that in Deuteronomy 24:16, God's Word says that no child will die for the sins of his parents and parents will not die for the sins of their children. So, it's clear Achan's whole family has been involved in this secret sin and old enough to be involved willingly.

Sin is always destructive—for an individual, a family, a church, or a nation. The judgment of God might not come suddenly, but it will arrive eventually.

Now that Achan and his family have paid the just penalty for bringing sin into the camp, the Lord tells Joshua to go back again, and this time, conquer the city of Ai. And all of chapter 8 deals with the battle plan for conquering Ai. And it's a very different plan from the one they used against Jericho. God tells Joshua in verse 2 to "lay an ambush against the city,

behind it." And with that plan, Joshua and the armies of Israel are victorious.

Even more important, they experience revival as a nation, making a fresh commitment to follow the word of God and the will of God. Any revival in your life today will look just like theirs did. It will be related to confessing sin—especially secret sins—and obeying the Word and the will of God.

Is there a potential "Ai" moment looming in your future? How do you know? How does Galatians 5:16-17 and 1 Peter 5:6-8 help explain the any "Ai" failure and help you avoid the "Ai" disaster in your own life?

How is Satan sometimes able to convince you that God isn't watching and listening to you as His child? What are the personal implications of the truth that you are part of God's family? How can fellow believers help each other avoid setting God aside in favor of something else?

What truth about God's response to Rahab the prostitute did Achan fail to learn and apply in his own life? How might these two events help you teach your yet to be saved friends or family about the good news of God's forgiveness through faith in Jesus Christ?

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MANIPULATION AND MIRACLES

Joshua 9:1—10:28

A person of integrity is not immune to doing foolish things, but he will seek to do the right things and trust the Lord as he learns from his mistakes. This is the kind of person Joshua was, and God rewarded his integrity by acting on his behalf in amazing and unexpected ways.

Something unusual happens here in Joshua chapter 9. We come across a Canaanite city that refuses to join the other nations in fighting against Israel. Evidently, they've put on their thinking caps and come up with a plan to make peace with Israel. Look at verses 4-6:

They . . . acted with cunning and . . . took worn-out sacks for their donkeys, and wineskins, worn-out and torn and mended, with . . . patched sandals on their feet, and worn-out clothes. And all their provisions were dry and



Gibeon (el-Jib)

crumbly. And they went to Joshua . . . and said to him . . . “We have come from a distant country, so now make a covenant with us.”

Why would these Gibeonites go to so much trouble to deceive Israel? Well, it's because they knew of God's command to Israel concerning what to do with people who live a long way off. The Lord said back in Deuteronomy 20:10:

“When you draw near to a city to fight against it, offer terms of peace to it. And if it responds to you peaceably and it opens to you, then all the people who are found in it shall do forced labor for you and shall serve you.”

Now that's very different from God's command concerning the wicked and unrepentant cities in Canaan. Look at what Deuteronomy 20:16-18 says about them:

“But in the cities of these peoples



that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance, you shall save alive nothing that breathes, but you shall devote them to complete destruction . . . that they may not teach you to do according to all their abominable practices that they have done for their gods.”

Let me tell you, these defiant nations knew about these commands. So, the clever Gibeonites aren't really interested in following the Lord; they just want to make peace with Israel by pretending to live a long way away.

Does their plan work? Here's what verses 14-15 tell us concerning Joshua and the Israelite leaders:

[They] did not ask counsel from the LORD. And Joshua made peace with them and made a covenant with them, to let them live, and the leaders of the congregation swore to them.

Joshua takes a look at their dried-up bread and their worn-out sandals, and the evidence matches their story. The problem is that they rely on their own observation.

Why didn't Joshua go to God? It wasn't that he didn't care about obeying God. He certainly asked questions and examined the evidence.

I think Joshua failed to go to God because he didn't think he needed to. This was easy. He saw the moldy bread, worn-out sandals, and torn clothing—case closed. That's the same reason we often don't go to God: we don't think we need to. We think this decision is a simple one; we can figure it out on our own. This is a reminder for us to seek the Lord's wisdom every day for everything.

Now it only took about three days before Israel found out the Gibeonites did not live in a far-off country but in Canaan, about twenty miles away.

So, what did the people of Israel do? Well, the Bible says here in verse 18, “All the congregation murmured against the leaders.”

It sounds like a church business meeting, doesn't it? All the congregation is murmuring against the leaders. Some pastors think this must be the theme verse for their church. Well, Joshua can feel your pain.

Even though Joshua made a mistake, he is a man of character, and he won't allow the Israelite nation to retaliate against the Gibeonites. It was wrong to make the promise to begin with, but now it would be wrong to break that promise. Two wrongs never make something right.

So now the Israelites are angry at Joshua, and the Gibeonites have made him look foolish. This is when a leader often decides to quit or retire and go fishing or golfing. Not Joshua; he defends the Gibeonites and allows them to stay alive, and God ends up using these events to bring about something rather unexpected.

Notice in chapter 10, we learn that a coalition of Canaanite kings decides to destroy Gibeon because of their alliance with Israel. Now Joshua could have stayed out of it and let these Canaanites kill each other off; and frankly, it would have solved his problem.

But Joshua is a man of character, and he gathers his army to go and protect the Gibeonites in fulfillment of their covenant. God honors the Israelites' actions, and in verse 11 He aids them in battle, striking the enemy armies with large hailstones.

As the day wears on, the battle isn't finished, and Joshua is running out of daylight. So, God provides another supernatural intervention here in verse 13: “The sun stood still, and the moon stopped.” God stops the sun and the moon in their tracks, prolonging the day!

The critics love to dismiss this account by pointing out that God can't pause the solar system without creating massive, if not total, destruction of the earth. Others say this is poetic language, and you don't need to take it literally. Well, something literal did happen to give Joshua a longer day. Verse 14 says, “There has been no day like it before or since.”

I think I've read every possible explanation of this event—everything from passing comets or volcanic eruptions slowing the earth's rotation to God tilting



the earth to give longer daylight. The truth is, we're not told *how* God did it; we're just told He did it.

Listen, if God is able to create the laws of the universe, He is capable of superseding those laws. That's why a miracle is a miracle. Something outside the normal laws of nature occurs, whether it's the Jordan River parting, Jesus walking on the water, or a dead man returning to life and walking out of a tomb.

God reverses the normal laws He created; He supersedes them, momentarily altering the way things normally work. That's what you call a miracle, by the way, and that's why you can't explain it.

Listen, I can't explain how Jesus paid the penalty for my crimes on His cross. And I can't explain how He will one day give me a new body that will last forever. I don't understand how; I just know who promised it, and He keeps His promises.

By the way, two of the chief Canaanite gods just happened to be the sun and the moon. Through this miracle, God is sending a message that He's more powerful than they are.

Now let's go back to chapter 9 and verse 27:

Joshua made [the Gibeonites] cutters of wood and drawers of water for the congregation and for the altar of the LORD, to this day, in the place that he should choose."

Joshua assigned the Gibeonites to serve at the altar. You know what that means? It means they are going to be in constant contact with the worship of Yahweh.

And something amazing will happen. The Gibeonites will eventually follow the Lord.

Later on, the tabernacle will be set up in Gibeon (2 Chronicles 1:3). When Nehemiah returns centuries later to rebuild the city of Jerusalem, guess who volunteers to help him—the Gibeonites (Nehemiah 3, 7).

Beloved, you may be surrounded by unbelieving Gibeonites today. They know about the Lord, but they're not interested in following Him. You probably work with them. You might be married to one of them. Let me encourage you to live in such a way that you draw their attention to your worship of the true and living God—and you just leave the rest to Him.

How has not including God in important decisions in your life brought on hardships? What heart attitudes cause believers to think they can make decisions without asking God? What tactics of Satan against believers contribute to this failure of consistently asking God for wisdom?

In what ways does fully embracing the creation account in Genesis 1 make such events as prolonging a day not only plausible but expected? How is your faith affected knowing God can respond miraculously to any believer's crisis?

God blended His grace with Joshua's integrity to draw unbelievers to Himself. What spiritual lesson emerges from this observation that impacts your ministry to your yet to be saved friends and family? Who is your life might the LORD be wanting to draw through your integrity?

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THE CONQUEST OF CANAAN

Joshua 10:29–14:15

The conquest of Canaan is a story of faithfulness—of God’s faithfulness to His promise to give Israel this land and of the importance of God’s people faithfully obeying Him. And as we will see, Joshua and Caleb also provided worthy examples of faithfulness to the Lord.

This study will take us through more than four chapters of the book of Joshua. These chapters give us the details of the Israelites’ victories in the promised land. After defeating a coalition of five kings of southern Canaan, Joshua and his army move forward in their conquest of this southern region.

Now, let me go back and touch briefly on something I have mentioned already. Why are the people of these nations killed by Israel, at God’s direction? ¹

Well, to simply dismiss this as the act of a cruel and vengeful God encountered only in the Old Testament is to misrepresent—and reject—the teaching of both the Old and New Testaments. There is one God, and He doesn’t change. His love and compassion, as well as His holiness and righteous judgment, are evident throughout the Bible.

What we see here is simply God’s righteous judgment on the extremely cruel and defiant inhabitants of Canaan. They had developed into wicked, immoral, and brutal nations. Their religion actually involved child sacrifice. Imagine going down the street today in your neighborhood and finding a temple where people are going to kill a little child as part of their worship service! You would probably want those people arrested and given the death penalty for such bru-

tality. Well, God is basically using the nation of Israel to carry out His judgment—the death penalty—on these nations.

Now there were four different categories of nations Israel would encounter, and each category of people was to be treated differently.

First, there were the *indigenous people* in the land of Canaan—people like the Amorites and the Hittites—Canaanite nations. Israel was commanded to bring the death penalty on all these unrepentant people (Deuteronomy 7:1-2; 20:16-18).

But what if they repented? Well, some of them did. We have already seen Rahab and her family rescued



Hazor Acropolis



because of their trust in God. Had these nations responded as Rahab did, there is no reason to believe that God would not have shown mercy to them.

Second were the *border people*, who dwelt on the outer edges of the promised land. These people were to be offered terms of peace by which they would serve the Israelites. If they refused, they were to be given the death penalty. Deuteronomy 20 spells this out.

Third, there were the *protected people*, who lived in regions Israel was to leave alone. The Israelites were to avoid conflict with them, if at all possible.

The fourth category were called *sojourners*. These were individuals or families who had immigrated to the land of Canaan, and Israel was not to oppress them (Exodus 22:21; 23:9). They could join the Israelite nation if they chose to follow the Lord.

*It's not the amount
of your faith but the
object of your faith
that counts.*

So, Israel was to execute judgment only on the wicked, unrepentant people in Canaan who refused the warning of God.

Now let me tell you something: the idea of grace ending and judgment beginning is not appreciated by our world today. But it is a biblical reality. Eventually the entire unbelieving human race will be swept into that final judgment at the great white throne recorded in Revelation 20, where mercy has come to an end, and eternal judgment begins for all who have refused to follow God.

The question you need to ask yourself today isn't whether or not God was justified in judging these nations way back then, but where you stand with God today. Satan would love to distract you over these Canaanites, whom you will never meet; I want you to

deal with God today, my friend, because one day you will meet Him.

Moving on, we find a brief accounting at the end of Joshua chapter 10 of Israel's conquests in southern Canaan. Israel leaves these cities standing, which later fulfills God's promise to give Israel cities they did not build (Deuteronomy 6:10-11).

Now in Joshua chapter 11, Israel turns to the north, where a coalition of kings have banded together to fight Israel. They're not going to surrender to God; they're going to die rather than repent. So, Joshua attacks and completely destroys them.

The rest of chapter 11 provides a summary of all the territory that came under Israel's control. Then in chapter 12, we're given a list of all the defeated Canaanite kings. Verse 1 sort of says it all here: "Now these are the kings of the land whom the people of Israel defeated and took possession of their land." The list includes those kings east of the Jordan whom Moses defeated, as well as those Joshua defeated in Canaan.

Now the conquest under Joshua is only the first step. Each of the tribes and families of Israel will need to go in and take possession of their allotted land—their inheritance. And each tribe will have to fight battles in order to settle their inheritance. Details of the specific inheritances begins in chapter 13 with lands allotted to the tribes east of the Jordan River.

Chapter 14 then focuses on the inheritance of one family—that of the former Israelite spy Caleb. Joshua's old comrade Caleb arrives and delivers a touching testimony in which he reviews the highlights of his life.

He says in verse 7:

"I was forty years old when Moses the servant of the LORD sent me from Kadesh-barnea to spy out the land, and I brought him word again as it was in my heart. But my brothers [the other spies] who



went up with me made the heart of the people melt; yet I wholly followed the LORD my God.”

What a testimony! For Caleb the issue was never how big the difficulty was but how big God was. That’s the same issue for you today. You might think you could never be like Caleb because you don’t have great faith; but it’s not the amount of your faith but the object of your faith that counts. Caleb was courageous, not because he had great faith, but because he served a great God.

Now frankly, you might expect Caleb to show up here as an angry, resentful old man. He had suffered for forty-five years because Israel wouldn’t listen to him. But instead, Caleb shows up here as eager as he was back then.

And in verse 12 Caleb asks for the hill country of Hebron, about nineteen miles south of Jerusalem. This was special land. This is where God gave Abraham the covenant promises; this is where Joseph tended sheep; and this is where Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were buried. Caleb says, “I want this special land as my inheritance.”

Now that didn’t mean this was easy land to settle. Caleb says in verse 12 that the Anakim—the giants—are living up there. But he goes on to say, “It may be that the LORD will be with me, and I shall drive them out just as the LORD said.”

He’s not bragging about himself. He’s depending on God. Caleb says, “I don’t know how God is going to work it all out, but I’m trusting Him as I move forward in faith.”

Beloved, faithfulness to God does not eliminate the battle. Just because Caleb was faithful did not mean God would make it easy.

Let me tell you, victory means there has been a battle. But God doesn’t just want to deliver you; He wants to develop you through the battles of life into a person of deeper faith and trust in Him.

Perhaps even now, the Lord is developing you, not by making things in your life simple, but by proving Himself to be faithful.

In what ways does Stephen’s explanation of Israel’s interaction with the “nations” impact your view of God and biblical history? Read Matthew 28:18-20 and consider how Jesus’ substitutionary death affects true believers’ interactions with the “nations” today?

What biblical truths can any believer embrace to avoid the bitterness that often results from conflict and difficulty? How might wisely sharing your struggles with your yet to be saved friends and family be helpful in their becoming believers?

How is your thinking about and commitment to spiritual victories impacted by the truth that those victories are often preceded with God’s wise but difficult path to those victories? What heart adjustments might the LORD be calling you to make as you ponder this reality?

¹ This discussion is adapted from Robert M. Bowman Jr., “Joshua’s Conquest: Was It Justified?” North American Mission Board, namb.net.

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HANDING OUT THE INHERITANCE

Joshua 15—19

God's promise to Israel comes to fruition when the tribes are allotted their respective portions of the promised land. In this triumphant moment, the faith of various individuals is highlighted, including Joshua and Caleb. But we also see hints of failure among the tribes.

We're going to cover several chapters of Joshua in this study, so you need to buckle your seat-belt.

This is one of those sections of Scripture you might think doesn't offer much for the New Testament believer. But there are powerful lessons here about God and the people of God.

We have already seen in chapter 13 the land portions allotted to Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh back over on the east side of the Jordan River. Then we saw in chapter 14 that Caleb requested his special allotment in Hebron. He's eighty-five years old and not slowing down. I picture Caleb driving a hundred miles an hour with the windows down.

We are in Joshua 15, where all the land portions are described for each of the remaining tribes of Israel; and first up is the tribe of Judah. Now this is Caleb's tribe. You might wonder why Caleb's allotment of Hebron was announced before the tribe of Judah's allotment, which included Hebron. Well, the Lord obviously wanted to spotlight this man of faith who dared to take on the giants living in this region.

Judah is Israel's largest tribe and ultimately the most significant as the royal, messianic tribe. And all of



Borders of Judah

chapter 15 here is devoted to describing the land given to Judah.

By the way, as you read through these descriptions of land inheritances from God, it's important to keep in mind that this surveyor's report is a record of a lasting gift. This is going to become their forever home one day—their permanent dwelling place—when Christ returns.

I love the description here in verse 12: "This is the boundary around the people of Judah according to their clans." There's this sense that they are surrounded by the goodness of God. It's another way of saying that God knows exactly where they are, just as God today knows exactly where you live and work.



In verse 14, Caleb gets special mention; it says, “And Caleb drove out from there the three sons of Anak.” These were three giants in the land.

I imagine Joshua throwing in that little comment to remind Israel that if eighty-five-year-old Caleb can do it, they can too. Caleb didn’t have faith in himself; he had faith in the power of God.

Caleb has set his sights on a city called Debir. He wants to incentivize the younger generation to get involved in this fight of faith, so he offers his daughter in marriage to the man who will capture this city.

A young man named Othniel has already spotted Caleb’s daughter; and he’s evidently been thinking to himself, *That’s the kind of woman I want to marry, but how in the world am I ever going to win her when she has a father like Caleb?* Well, now’s his chance. Othniel steps forward in verse 17 and not only captures

In other words, stop complaining and start chopping down some trees to make room for your people.

this city but also wins his bride. And following this victory, we’re given a long list of the Canaanite cities here in chapter 15 that will be conquered and occupied by the tribe of Judah.

I wish we could end chapter 15 with nothing but good news. But there’s some bad news in here, and it’s introduced in the last verse of the chapter with that little word *but*—“But the Jebusites, the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the people of Judah could not drive out” (verse 63). In the midst of all these victories, this one failure is cataloged, and it’s going to come back to haunt them, as we will see later on.

In chapter 16, the tribes of Joseph’s sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, are featured. You might remember

how Grandpa Jacob adopted these two sons of Joseph, effectively giving Joseph a double portion of his inheritance (Genesis 48:5-6).

So here you find Joseph’s allotment given to the two tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh. Now remember that half the tribe of Manasseh has already settled on the east side of the Jordan River. The other half of the tribe has moved into the promised land along with the tribe of Ephraim.

Then again, we’re given a little nagging, troubling detail in verse 10:

However, they did not drive out the Canaanites who lived in Gezer, so the Canaanites have lived in the midst of Ephraim to this day but have been made to do forced labor.

When we arrive at chapter 17, we are given some wonderful examples of faith among the tribe of Manasseh. The spotlight shines first on a warrior who trusts the Lord in battle. Then we are shown the faith of five daughters from one family who step forward to claim an inheritance from God.

But once again we read that little storm-cloud of a statement in verses 12-13:

Yet the people of Manasseh could not take possession of those cities, but the Canaanites persisted in dwelling in that land. Now when the people of Israel grew strong, they put the Canaanites to forced labor, but did not utterly drive them out.

Another example of failure is described in verses 14-18, where the people of Joseph come to Joshua to complain that their inheritance of land isn’t big



enough. But Joshua cuts to the chase and says to them in verse 15, “If you are a numerous people, go up by yourselves to the forest, and there clear ground for yourselves.” In other words, stop complaining and start chopping down some trees to make room for your people.

The problem really isn’t trees that are in the way but the iron chariots of the Canaanites. Had they trusted the Lord and marched out in faith, the Lord could have made those Canaanite chariots look like tricycles, for they were nothing to God.

In Joshua 18:1, we read, “Then the whole congregation of the people of Israel assembled at Shiloh and set up the tent of meeting there.” This is an exciting moment.

Up to this point, the tabernacle has been at Gilgal, with God’s presence in that awesome pillar of smoke by day and pillar of fire by night. The reason they can set up the tabernacle at Shiloh is given to us in verse 1, which says, “The land lay subdued before them.” In other words, the major military alliances of the Canaanites have been defeated.

The erection of the tabernacle at Shiloh also reminded the people to keep pursuing their inheritance from God.

I’ve actually stood there at Shiloh at the very place where the tabernacle once stood and where archeologists have identified foundation stones for the columns that supported the tabernacle. I just thought to myself that this is the very place where God’s glory was revealed; this was the place where Joshua worshiped; this was where Samuel grew up and ran around as a little boy. What a special place.

Now after all the tribes of Israel have received their lands in chapters 18 and 19, we come to the end of chapter 19, where Joshua is given the opportunity to choose any city he wants. This is surprising here, because Joshua does not choose some prize city; he chooses a broken-down little town in the mountainous territory of Ephraim. He will rebuild this town and settle his family here.

Beloved, Joshua was one of Israel’s wisest leaders. He was a military genius and courageous warrior, dependent on the strength of God. And now here, near the end of his leadership, he’s going to make a humble choice and serve others rather than himself.

We all could stand to be a lot more like Joshua.

In what ways does Israel’s struggles to take possession of what God has promised them, resemble you own? What heart attitudes and spiritual habits contribute most to changing roller coaster faith to consistent faith and victory?

When your yet to be saved friends and family observe your life as a believer, what “foundation stones” of God’s presence do they see in your life? What “renewing of your mind” (Romans 12:1-2) might the LORD be calling you to make to cause His foundation to be more obvious in you?

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THE CITIES OF REFUGE

Joshua 20-21

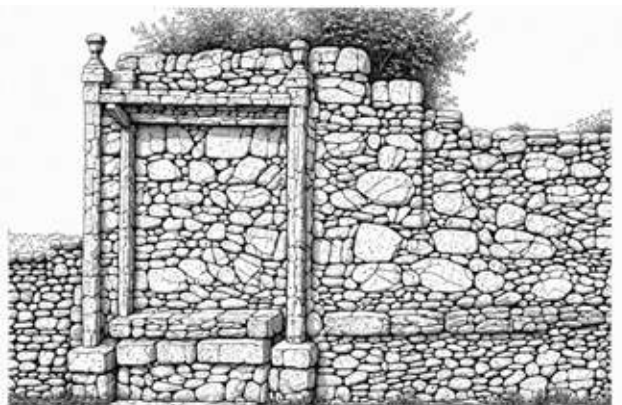
When God rules among His people, they will desire to seek God's wisdom and counsel. They will also desire justice and want others to put their faith in the Savior who has paid the just penalty for their sins. Some divinely ordained cities point to these priorities.

The promised land has now been divided among the tribes, and God's people are settling into their allotted portions of the land. Here in Joshua 20, the Lord gives Joshua a fascinating command to establish two types of cities for the nation. One type of city will be for legal refuge, and the other type will be for spiritual refuge. These cities become a picture of Jesus Christ, who gives us forgiveness and refuge and spiritual rest.

Joshua chapter 20 begins with the Lord's instructions:

The LORD said to Joshua, "Say to the people of Israel, 'Appoint the cities of refuge, of which I spoke to you through Moses, that the

manslayer who strikes any person without intent or unknowingly may flee there. They shall be for you a refuge from the avenger of blood. He shall flee to one of these cities and shall stand at the entrance of the gate of the city and explain his case to the elders of that city. Then they shall take him into the city and give him a place, and he shall remain with them. And if the avenger of blood pursues him, they shall not give up the manslayer into his hand, because he struck his neighbor unknowingly, and did not hate him in the past.'" (verses 1-5)



Gate at Dan with ruler's seat and bench along wall for elders

So, this first type of city, then, is a place of *legal* refuge. We will look at this more in a moment.



The other type of city is a place of *spiritual* refuge. These cities are designated in chapter 21, where we read this account in verses 1-3:

Then the heads of the fathers' houses of the Levites came to Eleazar the priest and to Joshua . . . And they said to them at Shiloh . . . "The LORD commanded through Moses that we be given cities to dwell in, along with their pasturelands for our livestock." So by command of the LORD the people of Israel gave to the Levites the following cities and pasturelands out of their inheritance.

Now let me first deal with these cities of spiritual refuge—they are often referred to as Levitical cities. The Levites were chosen to serve in the Lord's sanctuary and to teach the law (Deuteronomy 33:8-10). They were not given a specific portion of the land, but God designated forty-eight cities scattered throughout the land as their inheritance. You could call this plan of God "Operation Saturation," because God wanted to literally saturate the land with the Levites.

I have read estimates that no one in the land would have lived more than ten miles from one of these cities of spiritual refuge. So, no matter where you lived, there would be a least one Levite nearby who was trained in the law, capable of teaching, preaching, and counseling any Israelite who needed it.

Now let's go back to the cities of legal refuge in chapter 20. We know from Scripture that six of the Levitical cities also were established as these cities of refuge. They were designated to protect those who unintentionally killed another person.

The avenger of blood was someone appointed by the family or tribe to track down the killer; he was an Old Testament bounty hunter. This was not so much

a matter of vengeance as it was vindication in this ancient system of carrying out justice.

The one who had killed someone accidentally had one chance to stay alive—he must flee to the city of refuge and there present the facts of his case to the elders of the city. If they confirmed the death was accidental, he could live there. If he was guilty, he would be handed over to the avenger of blood.

The cities of refuge were an important part of Israel's system of justice. And again, let me remind you that these cities set the stage for God's provision of the Redeemer—our eternal refuge and Savior, Jesus Christ. And that's where I want you to run today.

Let me point out some key analogies here.

First of all, the cities of refuge were appointed by God. Just as God provided the city of refuge, so God appointed His Son to die so that He could be an eternal refuge for those who flee to Him by faith.

Second, the cities provided safety. I can imagine in that day a man running for his life, constantly looking back over his shoulder for any sight of that bounty hunter following his tracks. He's not going to stop to eat or sleep; he's running for his life.

Let me tell you, all who run to Jesus Christ are running for their lives. Outside of Jesus Christ you are not safe from the avenger of death and judgment. The only safe place from Satan, death, and the grave is the city of refuge, the Son of God.

*Run to Jesus Christ
right now. Your only
hope is in Him.*

Third, it was the responsibility of the Israelites to clearly mark the path to the city. Deuteronomy 19:3 seems to indicate that roads were to be built leading to these cities. They were to make it as easy as possible for someone to reach the city of safety.



We know from Jewish historical sources that the citizens of a city of refuge, built bridges over ravines and rivers; at every major crossroad, there was a sign pointing the way to the nearest city of refuge, and on the sign was one word: *refuge*. It is stated that these signs were large enough that a man running at full speed would not miss that word in the Hebrew language: *miqlat*—*refuge*.

According to history, many of these cities of refuge posted runners along the way. Whenever they saw a hunted man obviously running toward their city, they would run alongside him to guide, encourage, and protect him.¹

If you're a Christian, that's your role today. You are to be running alongside people, guiding them and encouraging them toward the Savior; and you are the signpost, pointing them in the right direction.

Finally, the cities of refuge were available for anyone. In Joshua 20:9, we're told that not just the Israelites could enter, but anyone living among them could run to and find safety and protection in these cities. What a picture of the gospel this is! It's for anyone and everyone—Gentile, Jew, black, white, rich, poor, educated, uneducated, the honored, and the homeless.

Let me tell you that if you are without Jesus Christ, you are not safe. You might not know it, but you are being hunted. There is a kingdom of darkness hunting for your eternal soul. The only hope you have is to run to the city of refuge. Death itself is pursuing you and will eventually catch up to you. The Bible says, "It is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment" (Hebrews 9:27).

Run to Jesus Christ right now. Your only hope is in Him. The Bible says, "The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23).

Pray with me right now: "Oh Lord Jesus, I'm that sinner who has been running away from You; and now I want to run to You. I repent of my sin and

receive You as my Lord and Savior right now. Please save me from my sin and from eternal judgment. I trust in You, Lord Jesus, alone."

If you sincerely prayed that prayer, I can assure you that you are now eternally safe. The Bible says, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Romans 10:13). You have found your City of Refuge, your Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Let us know that you have placed your hope and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ.

What does it reveal about God's heart and power that nearly 1200 years before Jesus was born, God was orchestrating history that pointed to the world's Savior?

You may not be saturated by them, but what sources of godly wisdom and counsel are readily available to you? Why would God provide them for you? Are these resources well-worn or collecting dust? How is your own walk with God a legitimate source of wisdom and counsel to other believers?

What do the cities of refuge reveal about God's heart for justice? And His heart for compassion? In what practical ways might a believer or a church be a modern-day city of refuge? What is Satan's bent toward anything or anyone that resembles God's "city of refuge?"

¹ Merrill F. Unger, *Unger's Bible Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (Moody Press, 1966), 208.

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AN ALTAR OF MISUNDERSTANDING

Joshua 22

How do you handle misunderstandings? More important, how do you *avoid* misunderstandings? Israel's greatest success was almost immediately compromised by a misunderstanding that could have been disastrous. This incident offers us some important lessons.

Something is going to take place in Joshua chapter 22 that is as old as the human race—in a word: misunderstanding. Misunderstandings destroy relationships, break up marriages, and divide churches and fellow believers.

The human heart is quick to misinterpret, misjudge, misunderstand, and condemn, whether we know the facts or not. The misunderstanding in Joshua 22 almost leads to a massacre.

Verses 1-3 set the stage:

At that time Joshua summoned the Reubenites and the Gadites and the half-tribe of Manasseh, and said to them, "You have kept all that Moses the servant of the LORD commanded you and have obeyed my voice in all that I have commanded you. You have not forsaken your brothers these many days, down to this day, but have been careful to keep the charge of the LORD your God."

Joshua is commending these tribes because they are about to cross back over to their inheritance east of the Jordan River. They are going to be separated geographically from the other tribes by the Jordan valley and a mountain range, and Joshua wants to make sure they remember that even though they might be out of sight, they are not out of mind as fellow Israelites.

Now verse 10:

And when they came to the region of the Jordan that is in the land of Canaan, the people of Reuben and the people of Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh built there an altar by the Jordan.



High place with standing stones outside the gate at Dan



They arrive at the banks of the Jordan River and, in essence, say, “You know Joshua told us not to forget that we belong to the nation of Israel; so, let’s build a replica of the altar at Shiloh, and this replica will become a memorial, a witness, to our national unity and faith in God.”

Now look at verses 11 and 12:

And the people of Israel heard it said, “Behold, the people of Reuben and the people of Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh have built the altar at the frontier of the land of Canaan” . . . And . . . the whole assembly of the people of Israel gathered at Shiloh to make war against them.

They were lightning quick to respond to what they had heard. And what had they heard? An altar had been built, and that can mean only one thing—idolatry. “So, grab your swords and let’s go wipe them out!”

Now the fire of emotion in the hearts of these Israelites is well intentioned, but it’s fueled by misunderstanding. And as we still know today, misunderstandings have the power to turn friends into enemies in a matter of moments, destroying fellowship.

Fortunately, the Israelites decide to send out a delegation of leaders to get some answers before sending soldiers. When the delegation arrives, they ask their fellow Israelites in verse 16:

“What is this breach of faith that you have committed against the God of Israel in turning away this day from following the LORD by building yourselves an altar this day in rebellion against the LORD?”

This is a perfect illustration of how *not* to confront someone. Without hearing any of the facts, they arrive with their conclusions—did you notice?—“You’ve broken faith; you’re rebelling against God.”

These two and a half tribes are probably standing there in shock as this delegation just rattles on in verse 17: “Have we not had enough of the sin at Peor?” This refers to the incident in Numbers 25, when Israel fell into idolatry.

Then in verse 20, they ask, “Did not Achan the son of Zerah break faith in the matter of the devoted things?” This goes back to Joshua 7, where Achan’s rebellion led to Israel’s defeat in battle.

Now evidently this delegation had been working on their speech because when they show up, they just unload the wagon.

And the tribes respond in verses 22-23:

“The Mighty One, God, the LORD! He knows; and let Israel itself know! If it was in rebellion or in breach of faith against the LORD, do not spare us today for building an altar to turn away from following the LORD. Or if we did so to offer burnt offerings or grain offerings or peace offerings on it, may the LORD himself take vengeance.”

They are asserting that God knows they didn’t build this replica to use it. Why, then, did they build it? They answer in verses 24-25:

“We did it from fear that in time to come your children might say to our children, ‘What have you to do with the LORD, the God of Israel? For the LORD has made the Jordan a boundary between us and you, you people of Reuben and people of Gad. You have no portion in the LORD.’”

Their explanation continues down in verse 28:



“And we thought, ‘If this should be said to us or to our descendants in time to come, we should say, “Behold, the copy of the altar of the LORD, which our fathers made, not for burnt offerings, nor for sacrifice, but to be a witness between us and you.”””

In other words, “This isn’t a replica to use; it’s a replica to remind us of our unity—that even though we’re living on the other side of the Jordan River, we are part of the same nation and follow the same God.”

And with that, this delegation realizes they had jumped to all the wrong conclusions. Terrible bloodshed and disunity are avoided when they report the truth back to the other tribes.

Let me offer some principles of application from what we see here in this text:

The first principle is this: *It is commendable for believers to be passionate about the purity of the faith.* The Israelites had misunderstood the actions of their fellow Israelites, but at least they were willing to confront what they thought was serious sin. They realized that if these two and a half tribes rebelled, it would affect the entire nation.

The apostle Paul doesn’t tell the believers in Galatians 6 that if they see a brother entangled in sin to ignore it and hope it will go away. No, he says to pursue the sinning brother and lovingly restore him.

Here’s another principle: *When misunderstandings take place, make sure your feelings are based on facts.* You don’t get the facts through the gossip grapevine. I’m afraid we’re often more interested in the juicy story than the hard, cold facts. Make sure you are tracking down the truth.

Here’s a third principle: *Gracious communication is the key to resolving misunderstanding.*

The two and a half tribes were willing to provide an answer to their accusers, and that took great humili-

ty. They could have said, “How dare you accuse us of idolatry; we will just go get our swords and show you!” Proverbs 15:1 says, “A soft answer turns away wrath.” I believe most problems in marriages are related to misunderstandings that have turned into unkind words. Most of the problems between friends are misunderstandings that get cemented with harsh, judgmental words. Even if you are wrongly accused, respond with grace.

One more principle: *Remember when you are wrongly accused that God alone will control the damage.* The truth is, you can’t manage the damage from gossip. But God can. No matter how much you have been hurt or misjudged or had your motives misunderstood, hand over to God your reputation and any kind of personal vindication.

Simply respond with grace. Then trust God with the damage control.

And in the meantime, God can use these altars of misunderstanding to humble you, shape you, deepen you, and conform you to the image of His Son, the Lord Jesus, who still to this day is the most misunderstood Person to ever walk on Planet Earth.

How has your jumping to conclusions helped complicate the resolution of misunderstandings? Read Jeremiah 17:9-10. Why is this truth a good starting point for *ourselves*, as we contemplate responding to the “offenses” of others?

Read Ephesians 4:29. How might this truth be helpful in any communication between people? What heart attitudes are most likely going to help you turn misunderstandings or potential misunderstandings into opportunities to magnify the Lord?

¹ Merrill F. Unger, *Unger’s Bible Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (Moody Press, 1966), 208.

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AN OLD SOLDIER'S FAREWELL

Joshua 23-24

In God's sight a great leader not only accomplishes good things for the people he leads but also sets an example of humble obedience, godly conduct, and spiritual priorities. These are the qualities we see in Joshua's last address to the people of Israel.

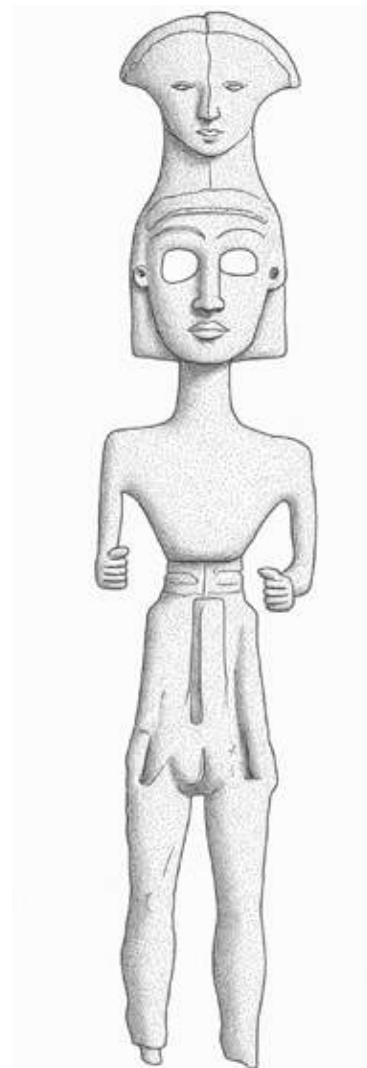
As our Wisdom Journey through Joshua comes to a close, we are about to hear a moving farewell speech, as Joshua says goodbye to the nation he has loved and led for many years.

It occurred to me that there are several elements in this farewell speech worth imitating today. The first element is *humility*. Joshua gives God all the credit for his amazing career. Here in Joshua chapter 23 and verse 3, he says, "You have seen all that the LORD your God has done to all these nations for your sake, for it is the LORD your God who has fought for you."

You could underline thirteen times in this chapter where Joshua repeats "the LORD your God." The Lord your God is worthy of all praise and glory.

A second element here is *obedience*. Down at verse 6, Joshua says: "Be very strong to keep and to do all that is written in the Book of the Law of Moses, turning aside from it neither to the right hand nor to the left."

The "Book of the Law of Moses" is the first five books of the Old Testament. Joshua is telling the people to stick to the Book. This is the key to true success for any individual and any nation. When you stick to this Book, life might not get easier, but you are going to be walking in the right direction.



A Canaanite deity



A third element is *caution*. In verse 7 Joshua states why obeying God's Word is so critical:

"That you may not mix with these nations remaining among you or make mention of the names of their gods or swear by them or serve them or bow down to them."

To this day, the greatest threat you face, beloved, is not economic or physical or intellectual; your greatest threat is moral and spiritual compromise.

Now with that, here in chapter 24, Joshua delivers this grand farewell speech to the nation. In the first thirteen verses, Joshua gives a history lesson, retelling how God brought the Israelites out of Egypt and gave them the land of Canaan. Then he delivers that classic statement in verse 15: "As for me and my house, we will serve the LORD."

Keep in mind that Joshua is now an old man; and this has been his life's motto: "I am choosing to serve God today." Beloved, this must be our choice today—not forty years ago, not ten years ago, not yesterday, but today! When I was growing up, my missionary father used to tell me, "Son, if you make the decision to follow the Lord before you get out of bed, all the other decisions you'll need to make will fall into place."

I think it's interesting here that Joshua doesn't just talk about worshiping God but *serving* God. He understood that whoever calls the shots in your life, whoever directs your path in life—that's the one you worship.

If financial success matters most to you, then your job or the stock market is really what you worship. If your girlfriend or boyfriend determines your moral standards rather than God's Word, then that girlfriend or boyfriend is your god—that's the one you are really worshiping. Joshua says, "As for me and my house, we will serve the LORD."

And listen to the people's response here in verse 18: "We also will serve the LORD, for he is our God." What a wonderful response.

But then Joshua replies in verse 19: "You are not able to serve the LORD." Wait. What?

Joshua has just asked who is going to join him in following the Lord, and two million hands go up, pledging their commitment to God. I mean, Joshua has just won the prize for the most evangelistic responses in a single service; but now he says, "Put your hands down because you really don't mean it."

*Are we passing
along to the next
generation, not just
with our lips but
with our lives, that
God is worth
trusting, that He's
worth following
and, above all,
worth worshipping?*

We discover what's really happening here in verse 23, as Joshua says, "Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your heart to the LORD, the God of Israel." The Israelites were pledging with their lips but not with their lives. They still had some "backup" gods just in case.

How many people today stand in church and sing, "My Jesus, I love Thee," while in their hearts they are thinking, *What I would really love is a bigger house or better health or better grades. My Jesus, I love Thee, but not as much as I love those other things.*

Joshua effectively says, "No, as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord, no matter what the Lord does to my house." That is genuine commitment to God.



Now the book of Joshua concludes with three funerals involving the bones of Joseph, the body of Eleazar, the high priest, and finally, Joshua. Verse 29 reads:

After these things Joshua the son of Nun, the servant of the LORD, died, being 110 years old. And they buried him in his own inheritance.

This may seem an odd way to end this book, but it's actually powerful. These funerals prove that God keeps His word. These faithful men were all buried in the land God had promised to His people.

Growing up in Norfolk, Virginia, one of my favorite places to visit in downtown Norfolk was the MacArthur Memorial. We knew every inch of that beautiful three-story building. And right in the center of the first floor is a marble lobby, and down below, as you look over a brass banister, you can see the graves of General Douglas MacArthur and his wife.

If you're not familiar with this man, he was the five-star general who commanded Allied forces in the Pacific during World War II and was later put in charge of reconstructing Japan after that nation was defeated. MacArthur actually pleaded for one thousand missionaries to come to Japan following the war.

Although I was only four years old, I can still recall his funeral procession through downtown Norfolk, where thousands of people lined the streets. I can still remember the horse-drawn carriage and flag-covered casket.

I remember when I was older going to the MacArthur museum—or memorial—and watching that black-and-white movie footage as the old general stood before Congress and delivered his farewell speech, concluding with these words:

The world has turned over many times since I took the oath on the plain at West Point, and the hopes and dreams have long since vanished, but I still remember

the refrain of one of the most popular barrack ballads of that day which proclaimed most proudly that “old soldiers never die; they just fade away.”

And like the old soldier of that ballad, I now close my military career and just fade away, an old soldier who tried to do his duty as God gave him the light to see that duty.

I wonder if, at the end of our lives, we will be able to say that we did our duty and accomplished God's assignment for us—whatever it was. Are we passing along to the next generation, not just with our lips but with our lives, that God is worth trusting, that He's worth following and, above all, worth worshiping?

With that, we say farewell to Joshua, until we meet him personally in the promised land and tell him how grateful we were for his example—that he showed us how to live out that motto for life: *As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.*

In what ways are 1) pointing to “the LORD your God,” 2) having a humble heart, 3) being an example of obedience and 4) sharing a word of caution, modeling the life of a disciple-maker? How do your actions show your commitment to both receive and live out the disciple-making command of Matthew 28:18-20?

Re-read chapter 24 and list the priorities Joshua expressed in his farewell address. As your yet to be saved friends “read” your life, what legacy are you communicating? What adjustments would you make to leave a legacy that glorifies God much more?

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