

Be Strong and Very Courageous

Rich Nathan
July 25 & 26, 2020
Are We There Yet?
Joshua 1:1-9

This summer, we've been teaching through a series titled "Are We There Yet?" The series has mainly been drawn from the books of Exodus and Numbers. We've been focusing on the time "in between" when the Israelites left Egyptian slavery and the time in which they entered the Promised Land. This in-between time. The reason we decided to do this series is because – as we've mentioned repeatedly over the last year and a half – our church is going through a major transition in our leadership.

At the end of 2020, I will be stepping down as the Senior Pastor. By then, I will have served almost 34 years in that role and will be turning the Senior Pastor role over to Eric and Julia Pickerill. We thought it might be good to explore the issue of transition from a biblical perspective.

What we did not expect when we planned this series is that we would be recapitulating the entire 40 years of desert wanderings of the nation of Israel this year! We thought we'd have a nice series on transition. This will help the church to prepare for our transition. We didn't think that God was also going to have us personally experience the desert wanderings.

I heard a pastor recently say that when this whole thing of COVID started back in February, wise leaders understood that this was not going to be a sprint but we were preparing for a marathon. Wise leaders understood that this wasn't going to be over in a week or a month, but it might go on and on. So, we prepared for a marathon. Then, midway through the marathon, George Floyd was murdered as well as Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery. We had tens of millions of people protesting racial injustice, not only in the United States, but around the world.

It's like we were just hitting our stride in the marathon and somebody said, "Here's a bicycle, ride this." So, we got on the bicycle and tried to respond again to the outcry regarding racial injustice, only to be confronted by the political divisions leading up to the presidential election. It was like somebody said, "Now that you're riding the bike, get off and swim several miles." It began to dawn on us that God had signed us up for a triathlons.

Apparently, and this is something I didn't know, there is something called a quadathlon. As soon as you get done swimming, someone hands you a kayak.

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Kayak pic

We're not only in a very pressured time with COVID, protests over our criminal justice system and our really divisive political climate, but in addition, our church is also going through a transition of leadership. It is an understatement to say that these are challenging times indeed. Many of us feel exhausted, anxious, stressed. Your feelings of stress might not just be in your head. **We're living in stressful times.** Transitions are stressful, even good transitions like marriages or going off to college or starting a new school or having a baby. Transitions are, by definition, stressful.

So, what do we need during these stressful times? What is the Word of Lord to you and to me, to this church and this nation during these extraordinary times of stress? The Word of the Lord is very simple. **Be strong and very courageous!** That's what I want to talk about today in this last message in our series titled "Are We There Yet?" "Be Strong and Very Courageous". Let's pray.

I'm going to be reading to you from Joshua 1. You can follow along on the screen or read it in your own Bible.

Slide Joshua 1:1-2

After the death of Moses the servant of the LORD, the LORD said to Joshua son of Nun, Moses' aide: ² "Moses my servant is dead. Now then, you and all these people, get ready to cross the Jordan River into the land I am about to give to them—to the Israelites.

In this text, we read about two great leaders.

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Two great leaders

Joshua was an aide to the servant of the Lord. Now, Joshua is transitioning from being just an aide to the servant of the Lord – I want you to see this – at the end of the book of Joshua, here's what we read:

Slide Joshua 24:29

²⁹ After these things, Joshua son of Nun, the servant of the LORD, died at the age of a hundred and ten.

Joshua is promoted from riding shotgun to driving the car. He is promoted from being Vice President to becoming President. He goes from being CFO of the company to becoming the CEO. He's promoted from being Associate Pastor to becoming the Senior Pastor.

I want you to consider the challenges that Joshua faced as servant of the Lord, as the one who is going to represent the Lord to God's people. He's called upon to lead the Israelites across the Jordan River, which at that point was at flood stage. This nation with all their possessions, all their sheep and goats and cattle, to say nothing of the babies and toddlers and young married, middle aged folks, older adults, widows and widowers had to be led across the Jordan River. No bridge, no ferry. Joshua must now provide leadership to this nation of grumblers and complainers, to people who write nasty emails and troll you online. He must lead the people that even Moses had trouble with.

Eric and Julia, are you feeling stressed yet? Do you think that Joshua, as he contemplated this new role as servant of the Lord, do you think he felt stressed? Do you know what the great enemy of any leader is?

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The great enemy of a leader

If you are a Christian leader over any group, over any ministry, and you are at all self-aware of your own weaknesses, your own inadequacies, if you are at all aware of the challenges that you face, the emotion that is going to rise up in you – at least it ought to rise up in you if you are living in the truth about yourself, about the world, about Satan – the emotion that rises up in us naturally is **fear**.

What I find really interesting, if you read through the gospel accounts, is that the most persistent command of God to his people is not about sex – which is really important! It's not about violence. The persistent command is not even about religious practice like prayer or Bible reading. All these things are really important. But if you read through the gospels, what is really surprising is the most persistent command is about not being afraid.

Virtually everyone in the gospels is constantly dealing with fear. When Jesus is born, Mary is told:

Slide Luke 1:30

³⁰ But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God.

Joseph is told:

Slide Matthew 1:20

²⁰ But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

Zechariah is told:

Slide Luke 1:13

¹³ But the angel said to him: “Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John.

The shepherds are told:

Slide Luke 2:10

¹⁰ But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people.

Fear is the biggest obstacle to people carrying out the will of God. Nicodemus is afraid to follow Jesus during the day. He’s afraid of what his colleagues will think so he comes to Jesus and says, “Nobody at work knows that I’m a Christian. It’s going to cost me professionally. It’s going to cost me personally. I’ll follow Jesus secretly.”

Fear is what causes Peter to deny Jesus when he’s challenged. It’s fear that causes the disciples to abandon Jesus in Jesus’ hour of need. It’s fear that keeps the women at the empty tomb from proclaiming that Jesus is risen from the dead.

Brothers and sisters, do you know what is the greatest obstacle to Vineyard Columbus doing and being everything that God has called our church to be and do in the future? It’s fear. Well, if we take this step or say that thing, this person or that group is going to be upset. That vision God is calling us to is just too hard. That’s too big of a stretch. We can’t do that. There are too many challenges.

Fear is often the root cause of much of our disobedience to God. We’re afraid of losing a friendship. We’re afraid of someone being upset with us. We’re afraid of disappointing another person. We’re afraid of looking stupid. We’re afraid of telling the truth. We fear our bosses. We fear our neighbors. Sometimes, we fear even ourselves. We fear our secret desires or getting a swelled head or what success might do to us. So we shrink back.

God gives a great encouragement to a fearful Joshua and to us.

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The great encouragement

Four times in Joshua 1, we read the words “Be strong and courageous”.

Slide Joshua 1:6

⁶ Be strong and courageous, because you will lead these people to inherit the land I swore to their ancestors to give them.

Slide Joshua 1:7

⁷ “Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go.

Slide Joshua 1:9

⁹ Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go.”

People say to Joshua in verse 10:

Slide Joshua 1:10

¹⁸ Whoever rebels against your word and does not obey it, whatever you may command them, will be put to death. Only be strong and courageous!”

What is the foundation upon which these words “be strong and courageous” is built? When I read about the death of Moses, I’m always struck by the simple truth that nobody is indispensable to the plan of God. No one. Not Moses. Not Paul or Peter or James or John. Not even the greatest Old Testament or New Testament leaders.

Leaders change, but God’s plan for his church and for the world never changes. When a man or woman of God dies nothing of God dies. A pastor’s work in a particular area may be over, but God’s work is never over. Jesus tells us in:

Slide John 5:17b

“My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I too am working.”

When John Wimber the founder of the Vineyard movement died

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John Wimber pic

So many people said “That’s the end of the Vineyard”. He died in 1997. At that time, Vineyard was in 15 nations. Now, just over 20 years later, there are Vineyard churches in 90 nations. A leader’s work may be over, but God’s work is never over!

To encourage Joshua (and us) we read

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Two great speeches

In verses 2-5, God speaks to Joshua about God. And in verses 6-9, God speaks to Joshua about Joshua. Let’s read together verses 2-5.

Slide Joshua 1:2-5

²“Moses my servant is dead. Now then, you and all these people, get ready to cross the Jordan River into the land I am about to give to them—to the Israelites. ³I will give you every place where you set your foot, as I promised Moses. ⁴Your territory will extend from the desert to Lebanon, and from the great river, the Euphrates—all the Hittite country—to the Mediterranean Sea in the west. ⁵No one will be able to stand against you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you.

First, in these verses -

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God speaks to Joshua about God: what God has done

Notice that God doesn't say to Joshua, “I want you to go and conquer the land of Canaan. It's all up to you.” The burden of success did not rest on Joshua's shoulders. The land of Canaan was a gift from God to the Israelites.

Slide Joshua 1:2

²“Moses my servant is dead. Now then, you and all these people, get ready to cross the Jordan River into the land I am about to give to them—to the Israelites.

Slide Joshua 1:3

³I will give you every place where you set your foot, as I promised Moses.

God is saying to Joshua, this is a done deal. You don't have to conquer the land so much as receive the land that I'm giving you. Yes, you're going to have to fight for it. But you don't have to make it happen. Walking around the walls of Jericho for seven days did not make the walls fall down. That was an act of God.

And, brothers and sisters, the same thing today is true regarding the kingdom of God. The establishment of God's purpose in the world, the will of God being done in your family or in your own life – we followers of Jesus don't build the kingdom of God. Sometimes, you hear people confusingly say We build the kingdom. But we don't! And, we don't bring the kingdom about. This is something that Jesus accomplished. This is something that Jesus achieved.

Victory over sin, victory over death, victory over the world, victory over Satan and the whole demonic realm was achieved through the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. What do we do? We simply extend the benefits of Jesus' already achieved victory. The church is not meant to be a shrinking, defeated, fearful remnant. The church is called to extend and share the victory of Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension. We share those benefits with the world.

Let me give you an illustration in a more personal way. Let me bring this down for you. All of us find ourselves in a certain sized box. The box is made up of gifts and talents that you've been given. The box is the opportunity that you have in life, circumstances that you find yourself in. Each of us is in a certain sized box. We don't have somebody else's talent or gifts or opportunities or circumstances or challenges. The box was given to us by the sovereign God. The only issue is whether you're going to fill out the box that you find yourself in. Are you going to use your talents, your gifts, your opportunities in a courageous way to impact your world to the fullest? We can choose to live in the corner of the box because of fear or doubt or feelings of inadequacy. But the Lord says to those of us who are afraid: "Be strong and very courageous!"

So God speaks first to Joshua about God and what God has done. And second:

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God speaks to Joshua about Joshua: What Joshua must do

Slide Joshua 1:6-9

⁶ Be strong and courageous, because you will lead these people to inherit the land I swore to their ancestors to give them.

⁷ "Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go. ⁸ Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful. ⁹ Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go."

What I find really interesting about God's speech to Joshua is what God didn't say. God didn't say to Joshua, "Here's the military strategy that I want you to employ in taking this land." Later on, God does give Joshua strategy, but that's not the foundation of Joshua's leadership. God didn't say, "Here's the people I want you to go with." That comes later, but that's also not the foundation of Joshua's leadership. God doesn't say any of the things that we would do if we were planning a new business, or planning a new ministry. If you are familiar with business language, God doesn't do a SWOT analysis with Joshua. He doesn't say, "Here are your strengths and the weaknesses. Here are the opportunities. Here are the threats." He doesn't do a strength-based survey of Joshua's talents and gifts. What is important is what is at the foundation.

What God did say to Joshua and he says to us – Eric and Julia, I'm talking to you right now, Pastor Charles, I'm talking to you, Pastor Scott and Pastor Irene, pastors of this church, leaders of Vineyard Columbus I'm talking to you – whoever you are, he says, "I'm going to give you a resource that if you lean on it, you're going to be able to extend the victory that I've already achieved through my cross and resurrection."

What is the resource that God calls us to lean on, especially during times of stress and transition?

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A great resource: God's Word

Slide Joshua 1:7-8

⁷ "Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go. ⁸ Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful.

God's Word is always relevant. God's Word was relevant to Joshua more than 3,000 years ago. It was relevant to the early church 2,000 years ago. It was relevant to the medieval church 1,000 years ago. It was relevant to Vineyard Columbus when we got started and throughout my ministry and God's Word remains relevant today and into the future. God's Word is always relevant.

It was relevant to the World War II generation and to Baby Boomers. It's relevant to Gen Xers, it's relevant to Millennials, it's relevant to Gen Z. It's relevant to blacks and whites and Latinos and Asians and women and men. God's Word is always relevant.

Why is God's Word always relevant to every generation? Because God never changes and because human nature never changes. We human beings are who the Bible says we are! We human beings are of incredible worth and we human beings are tragically flawed. It doesn't matter what age we live in. It doesn't matter how many letters are after our name. It doesn't matter what size house we're in, what our particular struggle is or what is happening in the world of politics or pandemics, God's Word is always relevant.

And God's Word is always to be obeyed. God says to Joshua then in verse 7:

Slide Joshua 1:7

⁷ "Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go.

Slide Joshua 1:8

⁸ Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful.

I know the secret to success in life. Obey God and over time you become the kind of person that in the deepest part of you you've always wanted to be. A wise person, a kind person, a good person, someone others can trust, someone who makes a difference in the world for Christ, someone who gains the respect and esteem of others. Do you know how you become that kind of person? Obey the Word of God. Meditate on God's Word and obey the promptings of the Holy Spirit in your soul. If God tells you to do something, do it. Don't compromise it. Don't procrastinate. Do what God said. And I know the secret for success for our church in the future, Eric and Julia. You and the other leaders must keep calling the church to live under the authority of God's Word! If God tells you to do something in his Word, do it! Don't substitute your ideas for God's! Do what God says and the church will be prosperous and successful!

Brothers and sisters, in this time where we've been signed up to do a quadrathlon – all these challenges of COVID, protests, politics, transitions and maybe in your life – you're facing a decathlon – God says to you, "I've given you my Word. I've given you my Spirit. Now, be strong and very courageous."

Be Strong and Very Courageous

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Are We There Yet?
Joshua 1:1-9

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