

JOSHUA—WEEK 1

TIME FOR COURAGE



F. Michael Slay

A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

Joshua, Week 1 — Time for Courage
The Cover Picture is by Jean Fouquet (1420–1477)
On display in Paris at the Bibliotheque nationale de France.

With the death of Moses, the task of leading Israel into the promised land is dumped on Joshua. The LORD promises to be with him and tells Joshua to be strong and courageous. So, when the people say the same words to Joshua, even though they couldn't have heard the LORD say them, it's a powerful moment.

Everyone is steeled for courage, but Rahab schools them. She's the real deal.

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1 Joshua 1:1–5

After the death of Moses the servant of the LORD, the LORD said to Joshua son of Nun, Moses' aide: "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. I will give you every place where you set your foot, as I promised Moses. Your 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. No 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.

Does that last sentence remind you of anything? How about this?

and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." — Matthew 28:20

Just as Jesus handed off the gospel to His disciples at the end of Matthew with a promise, so God handed off the covenant with Israel to Joshua with a promise.

Remember, the law of Moses isn't really about rules. The point isn't to get people to jump through a bunch of hoops. It's about a promise—the promise God made to Abraham and to Moses.

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

The death of Moses and the transfer of leadership to Joshua represents an essential shift. Moses gave the law, explained the law, and oversaw the building of the tabernacle. The covenantal promise is set. Now Joshua will captain the Israelites receiving this promise.

This parallels the New Testament in two ways. One is the handoff to the apostles mentioned above. The other is that the whole gospel is the fulfilment of a promise God made to Abraham.

"and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed." — Genesis 22:18a

He said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms." — Luke 24:44

I often think of creation as consisting of space, time, matter, and energy. But it's about covenants.

As we walk thorough Joshua, keep this in mind: Joshua is to the Pentateuch as Acts is to the Gospels. Both are about following God's plan.

This book will show us how it's done right.

It'll also show us how it's done wrong.

2 Joshua 1:6–9

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

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. 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. 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.”

This passage says, “*Be strong and courageous,*” three times and adds, “*Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go.*”

Joshua didn’t show any fear when he spied out the land in Numbers 14. Why is he fearful now?

Joshua son of Nun and Caleb son of Jephunneh, who were among those who had explored the land, tore their clothes and said to the entire Israelite assembly, “The land we passed through and explored is exceedingly good. If the LORD is pleased with us, he will lead us into that land, a land flowing with milk and honey, and will give it to us. Only do not rebel against the LORD. And do not be afraid of the people of the land, because we will devour them. Their protection is gone, but the LORD is with us. Do not be afraid of them.” — Numbers 14:6–9

He’s not fearful. The LORD isn’t telling Joshua to stop being afraid; He’s telling him to not get afraid. Joshua’s courage after spying out the land is good, but it wasn’t under duress.

Duress is coming.

Faith is easy when you’re talking about what you can do. It’s tougher when you’re doing it. The LORD’s advice to Joshua makes perfect sense.

But notice the detailed instructions.

“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. 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.”

These are “faith strengthening” exercises. Joshua’s courage is based on his faith in the LORD. So, to strengthen his courage, the prescription is to get back to the roots of faith.

One of the great challenges for a Christian is to not revert to secular thinking under duress. It’s hard to keep your cool under pressure.

It’s hard to keep your faith too.

3 Joshua 1:10–15

So Joshua ordered the officers of the people: “Go through the camp and tell the people, ‘Get your provisions ready. Three days from now you will cross the Jordan here to go in and take possession of the land the LORD your God is giving you for your own.’”

But to the Reubenites, the Gadites and the half-tribe of Manasseh, Joshua said, “Remember the command that Moses the servant of the LORD gave you after he said, ‘The LORD your God will give you rest by giving you this land.’ Your wives, your children and your livestock may stay in the land that Moses gave you east of the Jordan, but all your fighting men, ready for battle, must cross over ahead of your fellow Israelites. You are to help them until the LORD gives them rest, as he has done for you, and until they too have taken possession of the land the LORD your God is giving them. After that, you may go back and occupy your own land, which Moses the servant of the LORD gave you east of the Jordan toward the sunrise.”

Joshua is reminding *the Reubenites, the Gadites and the half-tribe of Manasseh* of their previous agreement with Moses.

But we will arm ourselves for battle and go ahead of the Israelites ... We will not return to our homes until each of the Israelites has received their inheritance. — Numbers 32:17a, 18

Those three tribes apparently made this deal for practical reasons.

“Ataroth, Dibon, Jazer, Nimrah, Heshbon, Elealeh, Sebam, Nebo and Beon—the land the LORD subdued before the people of Israel—are suitable for livestock, and your servants have livestock. If we have found favor in your eyes,” they said, “let this land be given to your servants as our possession.” — Numbers 32:3–5a

But Origen of Alexandria (ca. 184–253) doesn’t buy that. He thinks something grander is going on.

“I think it impossible for it to have happened accidentally that all who receive a portion through Moses were all firstborn. For Reuben was the firstborn of Leah; Gad, the firstborn of Zilpah; and Manasseh, the firstborn of Asenath the Egyptian Joseph married, the daughter of Potiphar the priest of Heliopolis. For myself, I can never be persuaded that it was by chance that the firstborn were the only ones whose inheritance was determined through Moses. Rather, I believe that in these things the design of two groups of people was already foreshadowed at that time: One would seem to be the firstborn according to the order of nature; the other, the people would receive the blessing of their inheritance through faith and grace.” — Homilies on Joshua 3.1 (Translation from the Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture)

The math is on Origen’s side. The odds easily exceed the modern standard for statistical significance.

Not all coincidences are messages, but some are. If something surprising gives you pause, then pause.

Meditate on whether God is trying to get your attention.

4 Joshua 1:16–18

Then they answered Joshua, “Whatever you have commanded us we will do, and wherever you send us we will go. Just as we fully obeyed Moses, so we will obey you. Only may the LORD your God be with you as he was with Moses. 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!”

This response shows that the people are fully on board with Joshua’s commissioning by Moses as his successor.

So the LORD said to Moses, “Take Joshua son of Nun, a man in whom is the spirit of leadership, and lay your hand on him.” ... Then he laid his hands on him and commissioned him, as the LORD instructed through Moses. — Numbers 27:18, 23

In fact, they seem to be too on board. Threatening to put people to death is over the top. They don’t need to say that. Joshua is great but he hasn’t done any miracles yet. Moses was miracle city.

Chalk this up to simple excitement and patriotism. They’re pumped, and they fully support Joshua. So they not only pledge their support, they pledge to force everyone else to support him too. It’s a bit silly, but pep rallies can get like that.

Then comes the punchline. *Only be strong and courageous!* Gee, that sounds familiar. Oh yeah, that line was in verses 6, 7, and 9.

Except that line wasn’t said by people; it was the LORD talking only to Joshua. So, there’s no way that these folks heard the LORD say those words. Their use of them now is amazing. Joshua must have been startled when he heard them say that.

Then he smiled.

This has to be super encouraging to Joshua because the hand of God is so obvious in what just happened. There’s no way that was a random coincidence. God had repeated the message three times, which in that culture is super-emphasizing it. Now, through another channel, He says it again. He’s telling Joshua to take this to heart big time. The emphasis is almost comical, like God saying, “Did I say you need to be strong and courageous?”

This may seem like a strange way for God to send encouragement to Joshua, but God is boundlessly creative in the way He communicates with His servants. This leads to an advanced lesson.

The process of sanctification involves our eyes opening—mainly opening to seeing sin, particularly our own sin. That’s important, because seeing our sin, and thus being equipped to battle it, is essential.

But another facet of this is picking up on God’s creative communication to us.

Keep your eyes open for this.

5 Joshua 2:1–7

Then Joshua son of Nun secretly sent two spies from Shittim. “Go, look over the land,” he said, “especially Jericho.” So they went and entered the house of a prostitute named Rahab and stayed there.

The king of Jericho was told, “Look, some of the Israelites have come here tonight to spy out the land.” So the king of Jericho sent this message to Rahab: “Bring out the men who came to you and entered your house, because they have come to spy out the whole land.”

But the woman had taken the two men and hidden them. She said, “Yes, the men came to me, but I did not know where they had come from. At dusk, when it was time to close the city gate, they left. I don’t know which way they went. Go after them quickly. You may catch up with them.” (But she had taken them up to the roof and hidden them under the stalks of flax she had laid out on the roof.) So the men set out in pursuit of the spies on the road that leads to the fords of the Jordan, and as soon as the pursuers had gone out, the gate was shut.

Why did the spies stay at Rahab’s house? Did they know she would protect them? Was there some connection to Joshua’s previous trip when he was a spy?

Apparently not. Scripture says none of that. Since the spies stayed there, she must have had rooms for guests. That explains it.

It’s not simply that they stayed there because there were rooms; it’s that it was a prostitute’s house with rooms, in other words a house of prostitution. Travelers staying there would be completely unremarkable; everyone thinks they know exactly why they’re there. That provides a perfect cover.

Except that the king finds out who they are and that they’re not there for sex. So he sends a message to Rahab to produce her guests. That sets up the lie heard ’round the world.

There’s no denying that Rahab’s action violates the commandment against bearing false witness; she did that in spades. She probably had never heard of the Ten Commandments, but that’s no excuse. Every culture prohibited lying. CS Lewis documents this extensively in the appendix to *The Abolition of Man*.

She also committed treason. Had she been caught, capital punishment would have been proper. Yet scripture holds up her faith as noteworthy. How can that be?

While Rahab’s faith is commended in Hebrews 11:31 and James 2:25, it’s an example of normal faith in action, not some superhuman instant sanctification faith that we can’t aspire to. She’s just like us.

She made a snap decision to hide the Israeli spies. She made this decision based on what she observed.

We’re not told how mature her faith was at this time—it had to be green—but she was “all in” based on it.

Rahab’s faith is rightly held up as an example.

Faith that’s not “all in” is dead.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. We've seen many transfers of power (e.g., inaugurations). What makes them work well?
2. What's a good faith strengthening exercise?
3. Have you ever gotten a "sign" from a coincidence?
4. Have you ever noticed a "sign" of repetition of a message from unlikely sources?
5. Do the Ten Commandments apply the same in war?

Items for prayer: