

## CHALLENGE AND RESPONSE

### Lessons from the Book of Joshua

The first five books of the Bible and the Old Testament cover the story of the Children of Israel – God’s chosen people –from their origin, through their captivity in Egypt, followed by their release from there and subsequent wilderness journey on their way to the Promised Land. Led by Moses on that circuitous journey, they were now poised on entry to the Land itself with Moses forbidden to enter because of his earlier disobedience.

That task was entrusted to Joshua whose experience in doing so is recorded in this book that bears his name. It describes the entry into, and progress towards, occupying the territory promised to Abraham.

The Book itself covers four main phases: entry into the Land (1 – 9), conquering the resident kings (10 – 12), allocating the remaining territory (13 – 17) and the challenge to complete the task (18 – 24).

#### Chapter 1: Joshua’s Commission

We start with Chapter 1 where Joshua, who had been Moses’ assistant, now takes over.

It starts with Joshua’s commission, beginning with the blunt statement that *“Moses my servant is dead”*. That era is over.

Now Joshua is commissioned to take over the lead: it is a ‘call’. Essentially, a call is a message that comes from an external source and carries with it a force and a purpose. Responding to it means being henceforth governed by its demands and direction. Romans states that a Christian *“should no longer live unto themselves but unto Him who loved them and gave himself for them”*. Joshua had already made this his motivation demonstrated by his attitude and decisions during the experiences of the wilderness wanderings, especially when supporting Moses and in his positive attitude on return from the spying expedition to Canaan. He was also to take a positive stance at the end of the book with *“As for me, and my house, we will serve the Lord”*. But this was him now launching out on his own, called by God.

Such a call (be it low-key or spectacular) is essential as a starting point for any meaningful Christian service.

It is not a call to a position – or status - but to a work. It needs a vision and an understanding of *“what the will of the Lord is”*. So, Joshua was given an indication of what that task was: to occupy and inhabit the land that had been promised but was now in the hands of ‘squatters’ who had moved in during the intervening years. That is an important lesson for us as we respond to the call of God to serve him. There needs to be a vision, an understanding of what the purpose of the ministry is. The Lord Jesus made this clear in the ‘Lord’s Prayer’ with reference to *“Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven”*. Jesus was always conscious of ‘doing the work you gave me to do’. He was conscious of his mission.

#### Joshua – Book Outline

1 – 9 Commission

10-12 Conquest

13-17 Allocation

18-24 Challenge

Involvement in such a mission is going to be difficult, so Joshua is given assurance of God's presence with him, just as He had been with Moses. He is told to be *"strong and very courageous"*. In the same way Scripture is full of promises of assurance such as *"Lo, I am with you always"* spoken to the disciples when they were commissioned to be *"witnesses unto me to the uttermost parts of the earth"*.

Joshua was not left isolated and alone in another sense for he was told in no uncertain terms that *'The Book of the Law'* should be his constant guide. That, too, applies to us in that any 'work for Jesus' has to be stimulated by and sustained from Scriptural teaching. While the execution is left to us as 'vessels' and instruments in his hand the nature of the ministry must be informed by, and consistent with, the teachings of Scripture where the will and purpose of God are clearly manifested.

That was for Joshua. But there is also a message for the people. It is not a 'one-man-band', it is a responsibility shared by all. Every member of the body is involved and needs to play their part.

So, instructions are given that the people – all the people – should 'prepare themselves' for what lay ahead. It is "an army of ordinary people", where commitment and "love is the key". Sadly, so much of Christian activity revolves around celebrity personalities surrounded by spectators or cultural patterns driven by secular motives at variance with the fundamental principles made clear in the Bible.

Such general exhortation is then followed by specific demands on a group of people, - the two and a half tribes of Reuben, Gad and Manasseh - who had requested, and been given right to, land east of Jordan but were obligated to fight with and support their colleagues who would be on the 'front line'. Not all Christians can be full-time workers but all are involved in the battle. Support, prayer, material resourcing is the obligation of all believers until "the race is run".

Finally, the popular response to all this was affirmative and a declaration of commitment. How that worked out in practice we'll see next week.

## Chapter 2: Rahab

With that commission behind them it was now time to enter the land and begin the conquest. As with an earlier 'point-of-entry' experience (*"Twelve men went to spy in Canaan, ten were bad two were good"*) it began with emissaries sent to 'spy out the land'.

Their expedition took them to the strong, impregnable (and wicked) city of Jericho, gate keeper to the Promised Land. There they were received into the house of Rahab whose home was on the perimeter wall. She welcomed them admitting that she (and her household) had heard of them and their exploits in the

### Chapter 1

#### JOSHUA

Call

Vision

Assurance

Instruction

#### PEOPLE

Preparation

Specific responsibility

Response

wilderness and was consequently fearful of what might happen. It may well be that she was disenchanted with the iniquity of Jericho and was attracted to the prospect of a better way. In any case she accepted their message and entered into a 'covenant' with them by which she should be saved from Jericho's doom and join them as a people.

News of the emissaries reached the authorities who immediately pursued them in order to stop them. Before the spies left, however, Rahab had been given assurance that if she trusted in their message and committed herself to their cause she should bear witness to that by placing a scarlet thread in her window so that when destruction came her house could be identified and she and her family rescued from the ensuing destruction. And, that is what happened when Jericho was destroyed in Chapter 6.

This incident has clear lessons for us and is a wonderful representation of the gospel message.

Overall, it speaks of a territory, having been wrenched from the governance of God (The Fall) with mankind *"doing what is right in their own ways"* evidenced by rampant godlessness and sin situated in the path of divine judgement, just as every human being is born a sinner, under the governance of Satan, 'children of wrath' and doomed to die.

However, into that situation comes a message from the people of God and with it an offer of rescue. Hearing the word and positively responding to it there is a new beginning with a disconnection with the cultural life surrounding us and a dedication to God, His salvation and his eternal purpose. It is being forgiven and being born again.

Thereafter it is a matter of living as a 'citizen of heaven' and looking forward to the eventual redemption. It is an expression of the Romans 10: 9 verse: *"If you confess with your mouth (the scarlet thread) and believe in your heart (the faith that comes by hearing – and trusting in – the word of God) you shall be saved."*

Another lesson is an insight into the approach for reaching out to others and for maturing in the new found life.

Emissaries (evangelists and missionaries et al) are sent into the condemned world (just as Jesus came into our world) with the story of God's plan of redemption, scout out the land and seek out those disenchanted with this world, preach the gospel and expect a believing response and public 'confession'.

With that experience of being *'translated from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of his dear Son'* there are clear implications for how to live. There is a clean break – mentally if not physically in the first instance - from the old life and regime, a commitment to look out towards and prepare for the new existence and the prospect of joining the people of God and enjoying all that the new life will bring.

With that foretaste the next stage of conquering the land – actually penetrating it – is about to take place with crossing the Jordan and the prospect of occupancy. That will become clear in Chapters 3 – 5.

### Chapters 3 – 5 Crossing the Jordan

There is an inevitable contrast and comparison between this incident and that of Crossing the Red Sea. The main one is the fact that the Exodus experience was clearly a work of God, mediated by Moses as God's

servant, at which the Israelites were spectators and beneficiaries. That is expressed in the verse: *"Stand still and see the salvation of the Lord"*. It was God who did it, securing their escape and bringing doom on their pursuers.

Now, however, they are not escaping but entering. Though led by Joshua as Moses' successor it involves them all: it is a corporate venture in which each is represented or has a part to play. In that sense it is reminiscent of the NT story and experience of the Body *"compacted by that which every joint contributes"*.

It starts with the presence of God being represented by the Ark of the Covenant carried by the priests as a lead. It is a new experience for the people who are told, *"you have not passed this way before"*.

Entering the land now entails, not watching, but 'taking the plunge'. For, not until the priests' feet touch the water does the flow stop making it possible for the Israelites to cross on dry land. And there they stood until the transfer was complete. At this stage of Christian commitment it is often a case of 'taking the plunge' or exercising the initiative' based on an effective understanding of the will of the Lord. So much Christian history is the result of people conscious of God's purpose and their commitment to it that they take sanctified action that is totally different from *"every man doing what is right in his own eyes"*. Jesus expressed it as: *"I have done the work you gave me to do"* and Paul could say, *"I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision"*.

With all the people now on dry land the people are told to fetch twelve stones (one for each tribe emphasising the corporate, representative, nature of the operation) and place them as a memorial to remind them, and their children for generations to come, of 'what these stones mean'. Any such testimony can only come from the heart of an experience: it is only something that is God-produced. There is no counterfeit or manufactured witness.

With that done, the priests came out of the water and everything returned to 'normal' except that now God's people were 'in residence' in the Promised Land. That had two consequences.

News of it (like the news that had reached Rahab's Jericho) had spread so that the kings west of Jordan, hitherto unaffected, were now filled with fear. That was the intended effect, for God's purposes always can be judged by the effect that they generate. Secondly, there were implications for life in the Promised Land.

#### (a) Circumcision

All the males who had not been circumcised in the wilderness were subjected to that ritual to mark them out as the people of God. There had to be a tangible indication. Whatever circumcision is or signifies in NT times, it marks a clear commitment and external testimony. It seems to correspond with baptism (variously depicted as infant baptism, historically - though not Scripturally explicitly - based on covenantal 'household salvation' or with the NT teaching on believer's baptism). The NT teaching expands on baptism as an expression and its significance for 'dying to self, putting away the old man and putting on the new as clearly stated in Romans 6. Perhaps it could be compared with the analogy of current dietary practices. The 'disapproved' ecological practice of eating meat – a natural tendency – is curtailed and replaced by vegetarianism and its different way of behaving and new set of values. For a Christian the great transition –

epitomised in the teaching of Romans 12 – is expressed in the negation (putting to death) of the old and it being replaced by the new so that the previous sin-inclined believer now *‘seeks those things which are above’*. Realising this is a major turning point in anyone’s Christian experience.-

(b) Passover

Just as the original request to Pharaoh was to allow the people to go *“three days journey into the wilderness to worship the Lord our God”* so the main purpose for these regenerate ones was to worship. That took the form of keeping the Passover which is directly related to and a constant reminder of their redemptive release from the bondage of Egypt. So, our worship should never be an end in itself (and often leads to divisiveness when it becomes so) but ‘fruit’ in that it is both the product of experience and the potential source of similar experiences in a regenerative sense.

(c) Produce

Another interesting feature is the injunction to now eat of the produce of the land itself, presumably following human endeavour – the ‘sweat of the brow’. While until now sustenance has been divinely provided – with little effort except prescribed collection – now they have to dig. Mature Christian life involves such digging for sustenance. Did not Paul say, *“work out your own salvation with fear and trembling”*? And Peter, *“add to your patience, etc)”*

d) Holy Ground

Now, it is back to Joshua contemplating the formidable Jericho lying in their path to full possession. While viewing the scene he encounters a being who describes himself as ‘captain of the Lord’s army’. Immediately Joshua falls to the ground before this undoubted theophanic figure (God temporarily appearing in the flesh) to be told that he should take off his shoes for this is Holy Ground. Any subsequent victory will be the work, not of human energy but of God, and his ‘army’ reminding us of the Zechariah statement: *“not by might or by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord.”*

Next week we shall see that power in operation through human action based on divine instruction.

Chapter 6: Jericho

As indicated above, the conquest for Jericho rightly begins at the end of chapter 5 with the appearance of “the commander of the Lord’s army” and the declaration of this being “holy ground”. Any conquest would be the work of God and would be operational in a new realm and on “higher ground”.

Jericho clearly represents a formidable bastion of godlessness. It is a place where evil prevails. It is the antithesis of God’s kingdom. But it needs to be overcome.

Apart from its geographical and historical details it clearly illustrates the current situation as far as our world is concerned. John declares that *“the whole world lies in the lap of the evil one”*. Paul speaks of natural existence as being normal behaviour for children of disobedience ruled by *“the prince of the power of the air”*. Jesus was tempted to (cheaply) accept the kingdom from Satan – a claim to ownership that was not

contested. Since the Fall every human being is governed by Satan until such time as they accept redemption through Jesus' death and resurrection, for that is precisely what Jesus came to do: regain the kingdom.

What is remarkable about the Jericho story is that God promised Joshua that Jericho would be razed to the ground and that victory was assured. That was a specific and clear declaration of the will of God. But, it had to be carried out by the people. Detailed instructions followed to carry the ark and blow trumpets around the city walls once each day and seven times on the seventh day.

On that final day the critical thirteenth circuit was to be accompanied by loud shouts from all the people at which the city walls collapsed and allowed unhindered entry to destroy the city. All, that is, except Rahab. She and those who had listened to the emissaries and followed their instructions did not perish.

The instructions extended to a command to 'save Rahab', destroy the godless city and its inhabitants, and allocate the gold, silver and bronze vessels for the Lord's treasury but to take nothing for themselves. Kingdom involvement is to be totally devoted to God, His priorities and to do nothing for oneself.

Jericho presents us with a challenge in these dark days: to occupy the territory for God; to pray, "*Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth, (as it is in heaven)*". That will surely entail deep and serious consideration of what is the revealed will of God at the present time according to Scripture and the witness of the Spirit as we discern what God is doing.

Tough as that is there is the assurance that 'Jericho' will fall, the godless perish and that victory is sure. Nothing can stop it? Or can something?

We'll see next time.

### Two Failures Chapters 7 – 9

Chapter 7 begins with an insight into the fact that the command not to covet the "devoted things" was disobeyed – with severe consequences.

After the conquest of Jericho it was natural that now, with the rest of the territory still to be occupied, spies should go and scout and recommend that a smaller target only called for a small contingent. Yet, against all expectations they were beaten severely. Joshua's concern that God had 'let them down' was rebuffed by the declaration that sin had been committed and its identification should be prosecuted. Carefully the misdemeanour was traced to Achan who had coveted goods and hidden them in his tent. That was followed by severe punishment and destruction.

But, God is merciful and now that the lesson has been learned there is a second attempt, complete this time with divine instruction and guidance leading to victory. It was an elaborate strategy involving all the people. In the account it is interesting to read that "*Joshua spent that night with the troops*". These operations involve all the people corporately so it is important that their leader is not aloof but very much part of the whole operation.

Such happening calls for the renewal of the covenant and fresh dedication to be the people of God. That should augur well and open the way to clear sailing. But that is not what happens for among the threatened

tribes currently 'squatting' in the land are the Gibeonites who, fearing what God is doing for and through his people, create a ruse claiming to have come a far way. Sadly, the Israelites succumb to this ruse and find themselves agreeing to a pledge to protect and accommodate these deceivers.

Through these stories about a wandering people and the obstacles they encountered in the form of cities and peoples those who stood in their way there is a significant lesson for believers.

The challenge is to occupy territory, to engage in "*victorious Christian living*". The collapse of Jericho –and even the crossing of Jordan – is ample proof that God can and will. However, when exercising their own initiative they succumb to two disasters.

In the first instance there is sin. It was committed by an obscure person in an obscure family. But, it affected the whole people. Each part of the body is important and significant. And has important implications.

The second flaw is deception. Unsuspectingly they are deceived by a false story and find themselves ensnared. Similarly it is essential that discernment is practised. So much of the NT is taken up with warning against entertaining plausible stories without them having been tested. The integrity of the church is important.

So, we face the challenge of more advance.

#### Chapters 10 – 12: Conquered Kings

Poised, ready to occupy the Promised Land there is reason to be confident; and also cause for caution. While Jordan had been successfully crossed and Jericho's walls cast down and destroyed there were also glitches in the form of the defeat by Ai and the deception from the Gibeonites. Yet, flawed though those initial events might have been, they had caused fear to rise in the hearts of the kings and leaders of the inhabitants of the land. As a result they formed syndicates and pacts to resist and overcome the divine intruders, but to no avail. God was on the side of his people and enabled them to overcome, even responding to Joshua's command that the sun should stand still while victory was achieved.

The conquest must go on, so these chapters record what had been accomplished over many years and, presumably, many battles. Chapter 12 provides an impressive list of the many kings who had been defeated and destroyed. It had taken much of Joshua's life span and now he was an old man. But, the task was not finished for chapter 13 contains those well-known words: *There remains much land to be possessed.*

#### Chapters 13 – 17: Tribal Responsibility

Surveying the scene, there is a reminder of the fact that two and a half tribes had eyed the territory east of Jordan on the way and laid claim to it. In doing so, they resisted the objection that they were seeking the easy option but committed themselves to fighting with the rest until victory was finally achieved. Reuben was allocated the southern portion, Gad the middle and Manasseh the top section to which they would return when hostilities were over.

West of Jordan the vast territory bounded by the sea and Jordan was to be allocated to other tribes. In claiming territory in the south, Caleb emerges again (after a period in the shadows) to claim the portion he

had been promised by Moses following his – and Joshua’s – positive foray to spy out the land and asked “*Give me this mountain*” – a phrase, like several others in this section, which is poetic in its capture of a concept of seeking that which is worthwhile and precious. Along with the extensive territory allocated to Judah, Caleb sees the need for further possession, which he might not manage, and so offers his daughter in marriage to whoever would conquer that plot. Othniel responds and his wife, Achsah, makes another demand – equally poetic – to *give me springs of water*, thus ensuring life and blessing, not just barren territory. What images that conjures in the soul. Scripture warns against inappropriate requests when it says “*He granted their request but sent leanness to their souls*”.

Another notable incident – again in Judah territory – is the request for more land. The answer given is an exhortation to work for it themselves and clear the forest for additional possession, but one that is safe and secure.

Thinking of church and ‘kingdom’ responsibility boundaries are clearly described. The church is a body, with different parts and in the wholeness of God’s economy there are different responsibilities and particular contributions to be made by each part. There is no question of better, only different – and complementary.

And, there is one snag. The narrative indicates that pockets of resistance remained and small enclaves of residual occupants allowed to stay. These “*small foxes*” had the potential of ‘spoiling the vineyard’. Similarly small pockets of ‘hidden sin’ can lead to compromise and downfall.

So far, so good. But there still remains land to be possessed.

### Chapters 18 – 22: Special Provision

Reading between the lines in the story, it would appear that significant advances had already been made and that the Israelites were occupying substantial territory. Corporate initiatives and especially individual enterprises had made sure of this. Yet, the reality is that seven of the tribes still had no territory of their own and a large tract, albeit peripheral, was still to be colonised.

The approach to this is worth noting. Rather than rally the troops with war cries and pushing them into action the strategy now is to gather together ‘in conference’ as it were. The remaining tribes (and presumably the others) needed to face their responsibility and gain possession. That started with a survey of the territory in question and its allocation – or ‘apportionment’ – to each of the remaining tribes.

This teaches us an important lesson in how God works. He is concerned with the positive. Rather than decry a fallen world, he wants to “*build my church*” and to “*make known his manifold wisdom by that church*”. While previous advances reflected human initiatives, like Caleb’s claim on “*this mountain*” it is now a matter of distributing responsibility and delegating action. What that action turned out to be and how it was discharged is not told but that is the principle. Today’s church needs to “*face a task unfinished*” and resolve the answer. Valid examples abound. The synagogue was an expediency in a captive situation that eventually became a key launch pad for NT evangelism; George Verwer’s OM ship – The Logos – has become a means of ‘entering closed countries’. God’s word to his people is “*You do it*”. Knowing what needs done depends on



God's word: working out how it can be done is entrusted to his godly servants. Even today, Zoom has become an instrument in God's hand.

And it works, for Joshua 21: 41 – 45 declares *"The Lord gave Israel all that land ... they took possession .... Not one of all the Lord's good promises to the house of Israel failed; every one was fulfilled"*.

There were two important features to that accomplishment. Arrangements introduced way back in the wilderness were ensured. In the first place cities of refuge were set up making it possible for the innocent to receive appropriate protection and justice. The kingdom of God is good for people and seeks their welfare. Secondly, provision is made for the priests and Levites who 'gave themselves' wholly to the work of the Lord. In the same way the characteristic of God's people should be – as it was in the Book of Acts – welfare. And those who give of themselves wholly to Christian service should be provided for by their fellow believers.

And, chapter 22 has echoes of the past and important lessons for the present. Following their arduous wanderings through the wilderness and subsequent approach to the Promised Land by the back door, as it were, two and a half tribes saw the land east of the Jordan and wished to make claim on it. While at first their request was strange they accepted Moses' challenge that, even if they laid claim to that territory, they still had an obligation to fight with their brothers – a condition they warmly agreed to. Now, with that promise kept they were free to return. They had *'finished the work you gave (us) to do'*.

Their next act was to raise a replica altar at the Jordan where the two sets of territory met. Such an action was deemed provocative and deviant. However, after discussion, their motives became understood and appreciated turning out to be very noble in their purpose.

That has an important lesson to teach us: not to react and be prejudiced without knowing the motive and appreciating the situation and its corollaries. So often there are Christian disputes over such seemingly contradictory, pseudo aberrant, actions that, with gracious discussion could be understood, appreciated and optimised.

So, with the promises fulfilled and responsibility finally discharged the land had peace. Were they now safe and dry? We'll see.

#### Chapters 23 & 24: Final Charge

Yes and no! They certainly had enough land to live in and territory that was open to being possessed but which, for the time being was still being lived in by residual elements of the old regimes. No good would come of that.

Yet, they are encouraged to see the positive and appreciate all that they could see that God had done for them in settling them in this land. It was not finished as Joshua tells them what he had been told in his younger days: *Be strong and very courageous*. God would push back these squatters and drive them out into the sea. But, they were to play a part in that being done, hence the command to be bold as Joshua had been in his day.

Two clear guidances were offered which would prove essential for that. They were to keep the Law and its command not to worship other idols. And they were to love God to such an extent that any rival was totally excluded. This commitment and devotion meant that they would not adopt other idols, mix with the nations, or follow their practices at their peril and inevitable damaging effects. From his standpoint Joshua was assured that none of the things God had promised had failed to come to pass. God was mighty. But, that power for good would also be totally destructive should they abandon him and worship other gods. It is Romans that reminds us that – in contrast to the love of God - *“the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness.*

While chapter 23 looks at the immediate, the final chapter takes a wider view and traces the redemptive work of God from the call of Abram from the godless Mesopotamia to Canaan where a promise was given that he would be *“the father of a great nation”* and inherit that land. Meanwhile that family transferred to Egypt, found itself in bondage to the *“ruler that knew not Joseph”* only to be rescued by the miraculous events of that first Passover. It is interesting that in this narrative events like the blood of the lamb or the provision of manna and water in the wilderness – and even the Ten Commandments on Sinai – are not mentioned as such – only implied – while crossing the Red Sea and conquering the kings are. What is outlined is that God achieved his objectives and they were now located in a ‘home’ of their own. That was sufficient to spontaneously generate an appreciative fear of and love for God.

Yet, because the land still had residual elements of the unlawful residents they were challenged to make a choice. If they were dissatisfied with God then they should seek an alternative.

Joshua, however, was clear: *“As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”*

The popular choice as expressed in their willing response was to choose God –an action that perhaps came too easily for them – so they were warned that it was an almost impossible choice for them for it meant total commitment to a holy God, and all that that meant.

To confirm this Joshua set up a stone of witness as he consolidated the covenant between God and them. God would not renege, but would they? That generation and the next would serve the Lord but we know from Judges and the historical books that that did not continue. God was faithful but the people were not.

However, there is a fragment at the end of the chapter with the intriguing comment that Joseph’s bones were buried at Shechem. Genesis 48 relates the orders Joseph gave while in Egypt that they should take his bones with them to the Promised Land, which they eventually did. When he is cited in the Heroes of Faith list in Hebrews 11 it is not for any of his exploits that he is mentioned but for this request: taking his bones to the (promised) land. He believed God.

And that is the overriding message of this book, that God will fulfil his purposes, his intentions will not be (fatally) thwarted but, *“Jesus shall reign where’er the sun”*. The faithful souls will continue to follow the Lord wholeheartedly, be devoted to the word of God and be committed to his will, regardless of the challenge or the situation. While we do not know to what extent Caleb continued wholehearted involvement we do now that Joshua was faithful to the end and was motivated by the knowledge that the God who can is the God who will.

That should be sufficient motive for us as we '*labour for the master*'.

hj June 2022