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Be Strong and Courageous

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When my parents first went to PNG as missionaries, they were sent on a one-week orientation trip to a place called Mount Bosavi. It was a village in the mountains that had an airstrip, a handful of huts, and a tiny store. That was it. No roads, no cars, no phones, and no way out until the plane returned in a week. They were encouraged to take just a few essentials and a little bit of food then, then were flown in and left at the airstrip, with three little kids and a few packets of noodles in tow. The house we stayed in had been empty for a number of years, was infested with every bug known to man, and had no electricity or running water. Not a worry, my parents thought, it's all part of the adventure. As long as we have food, we'll be fine. But on the first morning, when they trudged to the little store to buy supplies, they found the shelves empty, bar a box of matches and bag of mouldy flour. It was a week of bucket showers, candlelight and rather empty tummies. Perhaps a fitting welcome to missionary life after all! On the last night of the week, knowing that the ordeal was over, mum cooked up the last of the noodles she'd carefully rationed. A tiny amount of leftovers was wrapped up and tossed into the rubbish pit. We slept easy, knowing the plane would be there in the morning and take us back to warm showers and a well-stocked pantry. But much to our horror, when we woke in the morning, the weather had closed in. There would be no plane or full pantry that day. And we discovered that overnight noodles from the rubbish pit taste remarkably good.

Have you ever reached your goal or destination, only to find there's so much more to go? You think you've made it, only to realise the journey's really only just begun?

This was exactly the situation the Israelites found themselves in when they finally set up camp on the east side of the Jordan River, just across from the promised land.

40 years of wandering in the desert, of waiting for the older generation to pass away as judgement for their sin, of anticipating the day they will finally enter the promised land and settle down. To be able to build houses. Plant crops. Put down roots. It's the dream, isn't it? After forty years, they've done their time. And as they finally make camp next to the Jordan, there must have been a sense of relief. They've made it. They're home.

Except. The land was already occupied. This was no deserted island that God has promised them – it's a land full of different tribes with their kings and armies and fortified cities. Other people's towns. Other people's homes. It's not a case of simply moving in. They can't just ask nicely for all the Canaanites to scoot over a little bit. And the Canaanites aren't exactly a warm and cuddly group. Genesis 15 tells us they've been allowed to occupy the land up until this point so that *their sin might reach its full measure*. Their religious practices are horrendous. We hear about them in Deuteronomy 18: sacrificing children in fire; divination and sorcery; omens, casting spells and witchcraft; mediums, spiritists and those who speak with the dead. These things are detestable to God. The Canaanites are a seriously corrupt people group. And they are also powerful. It's the reason the Israelites didn't enter the land 40 years earlier – 10 of the 12 spies who scouted the land back then reported the people were incredibly strong, descendants of the Nephilim - of giants! – and that the land *devours those living in it*.

The Israelites may well have reached their destination – but oh how far they have to go before the land that flows with milk and honey is theirs.

And the one who gets the unenviable job of leading the people to inherit the land is Joshua.

We first meet Joshua in Exodus 17 – fresh out of Egypt, the people faced an attack from the Amalekites, and a young Joshua was tasked with leading the military charge against them. By the next time we hear of him, in Exodus 24, he is Moses' aide. Joshua was a man of military skill and a man of faith in God. After scouting the promised land back in Numbers 13, as all of Israel despair at the other spies' reports, he and Caleb exhort the people *if the Lord is pleased with us, he will lead us into the land 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 swallow them up! Their protection is gone, but the Lord is with us*.

What incredible trust in God! And all these years later, it's Joshua who God chooses to lead Israel into the fulfilment of his promise.

[Read Joshua 1:1-9]

Joshua's task is threefold: firstly, he's got the military campaign, leading Israel into war against the residents of the land, and all the while making sure the women, children and elderly are kept safe. Secondly, once the land has been conquered, he's got to divide it up between the tribes of Israel. No chance of squabbles or fights there, hey. And we think deciding who gets to sit in the front seat of the car is hard! And thirdly, a task that makes the first two look like a piece of cake, Joshua's got to encourage the covenant faithfulness of Israel – establish them morally, ethically and spiritually in the land of promise. Exhort them to love the Lord their God with all their being. Encourage faithfulness and obedience. Why? Because, as we learn in Deuteronomy 28, if they don't keep their side of the covenant, they will come to ruin and be thrown out of the land as swiftly as they entered it. It's God who gives it to them, and it's God who can take it away.

It's an immense task that Joshua is facing. They are so close, but yet so far. Yet, Joshua doesn't do this alone. God's Spirit was with him – before he'd died, Moses had laid hands on Joshua and we're told *he was filled with the Spirit of Wisdom*. God would be with him every step of the way. And just as God spoke with Moses before him, God speaks with Joshua here. He charges Joshua with three things, and with each command, there's a corresponding promise.

The first command that God gives comes in verse 2. God says, *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*. The Hebrew is a little more direct – *get up! Cross the Jordan! Lead these people to the land that I am ready to hand over to them*.

There's an ancient Chinese proverb that says *a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step*. No matter how great the journey or how impossible the task seems, no matter how far ahead of ourselves our minds might take us, the first step is simply to take the first step. The task that lay before Joshua was enormous. There were hundreds of unknowns. Hundreds of contingencies and variables. So much he couldn't predict or control, so much he could have over-analysed or catastrophised about, so much he no doubt wanted God to spell out for him. But God didn't. He simply says *get up and cross the Jordan*. Take the first step. And if Joshua can do that, look at the promise that God gives in verse 3: *I will give you every place where you set your foot*. Take the first step. Then the next, then the next, and everywhere you tread will be yours. Notice that it's not because the Israelites fight for it and take it that the land will be theirs. It will be theirs because *God will give it them. God will do it*. And not only will the land be theirs, but in verse 5 *no one will be able to stand against you all the days of your life*. God will protect them. Walk forward in faith, he says to Joshua, and I will do the rest.

The second command God gives Joshua is to carefully obey God's law. In verse 7, *be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left*; verse 8 *keep this Book of Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it*.

I have a brother in the Defence Force and he's in the process of upskilling at the moment. Every week, he's thrown into a different course – survival courses, ropes courses, firearms courses, urban warfare courses, parachuting courses. In the future, he'll face situations that could take his life, so now, they teach him how to stay alive.

Joshua faces the most daunting warfare campaign of his life, so now God instructs him in military strategy and arms-bearing and defensive tactics No. Obey my word, God says. Keep in on your lips constantly,

meditate on it – quite literally in the Hebrew – recite it quietly, day and night, all the time. Don't veer from it to the right or to the left. In other words, God instructs Joshua to fill himself to the brim with his word, so that he can live it out. I can't imagine the Defence Force adopting this training any time soon!

It might seem like an oddly-timed or impractical command on the surface, but if we think about it, perhaps it's not. God had promised to give them the land. We know that from Abraham's days. We know that from their slavery days. We know that from what God's just said to Joshua. If it's God who is going to go before them and fight for them and give them the land, what they need is not military prowess but to keep in step with God. And if being given the land and being allowed to stay in it is conditional on their covenant faithfulness, as Deuteronomy 28 makes clear, then knowing and living out God's word is imperative.

God's word is life and blessing. Turning from it is death. Joshua could trust the military side of things into God's hands – he had far more important things to be concerned about! If he lived according to God's word and encouraged all of Israel to do the same, God promises they will be prosperous and successful wherever they go.

The final command that God gives Joshua is to be strong and courageous. God repeats this three times, in v6, v7 and v9, and it's a command that extends over all that lies ahead – in the crossing over the Jordan, in the battles they will face, in dividing up the land, in seeking to keep close to God's word – in all of this, God commands Joshua to be strong and courageous. And considering what he faces, giving way to fear and discouragement would be very easy, wouldn't it. It'd be a very human response. I'm afraid enough of speaking in front of 100 people – you can forget about me leading a nation into battle! And yet what God tells Joshua here is not some kind of pop psychology, rally your strength and pull yourself up by the bootstraps pep-talk. God is not asking Joshua to dig deep into his own human resources and find strength and courage. He's not asking Joshua to rely on himself at all.

Have a look at verse 6: *Be strong and courageous, because you will lead these people to inherit the land I swore... to give them.* Verse 7: *Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey my law... that you may be successful wherever you go.* Verse 9: *Be strong and courageous...for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go."*

It's strength and courage based on what God has promised. God says if you take the first step, I will give you the land. If you obey my law, I'll see to it that you're prosperous and successful. Do not be afraid or discouraged, because I will be with you everywhere you go; I will not leave you or forsake you. As Moses' aid, Joshua had had a front-row seat in seeing how God kept his promises, seeing how God provided for them and protected them. He had seen how God had never failed them in their journey through the wilderness. And now God promises to give them the land and make them prosperous and be with them. Be strong and courageous, because I am who I am, my promises are true, and I will never leave you. Joshua had seen God's faithfulness till this point; he could trust God to be faithful as they walked forward. He could take those first steps in strength and courage because it was a strength and courage founded not on human abilities, but on the unfailing God who keeps his promises.

They were so near and yet so far, but with the Lord their God fighting for them, they could walk forward in strength and courage knowing that he would lead them home.

And it's the same for us today. We too are so near and yet so far. Our promise land, heaven, eternity with our God, is ours – yet for now we walk as strangers on this earth. Redemption is ours, yet for now we continue to battle with our doubts and sinfulness. Adoption into God's family is ours, we are his children, yet for now the devil continues to have a go at us. Holiness and righteousness are ours – yet for now we are a broken people. Peace and joy are ours – yet for now we suffer in all manner of trials.

We are so close and yet so far. And though our lives here on earth are in many ways a battle, there's also a very real sense in which the battle is already won. Because God sent another Joshua. Jesus. God's own son, who lived for us, died for us, and gained victory for us. Jesus fought for us, and he overcame. He overcame sin, he overcame evil; he did for us what we were powerless to do for ourselves. Every promise of God was fulfilled in him, and everything he gained is ours if we believe in him and hold fast to him. We can trust him to lead us home.

Rather than getting overwhelmed by the challenges of life or uncertainties of the journey, we too are called just to take the next step, put one foot in front of the other, and trust God to lead us along the path he'd have us take. We let him worry about the big picture and strive simply to walk in faithfulness today. And as we walk, we hold tight to God's word, meditating on it, filling ourselves up with it and living it out. Because his word is life, it is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path, and those who obey it – not just hear it – are blessed. And finally, we too are called to be strong and courageous. Strong and courageous as we walk forward and as we live by God's word. Strong and courageous because we too serve the faithful, unfailing God, who will be with us always, even to the very end of the age.

And so we can walk out those doors into the unknown days ahead, trusting God, holding tight to his word, in strength and courage, because we know that he who promised is faithful.

COMMUNION



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and courageous!
 DO NOT BE AFRAID
 OR DISCOURAGED
 FOR THE
Lord your God,
 IS WITH YOU
 WHEREVER YOU GO.
Joshua 1:9