

AM Joshua 1:1-10 Change and Unchanging

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[0 : 00] Now let us turn to the Word of God in the Old Testament in the book of Joshua, and I'm actually reading from the New International Version. Joshua chapter 1, from the beginning.

Joshua chapter 1, after the death of Moses, the servant of the Lord, the Lord said to Joshua, son of Nun, Moses' assistant, 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 great sea in the west. No one will be able to stand up 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. Be strong and courageous, because you will lead these people to inherit the land I swore to their forefathers to give them.

[1 : 26] 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.

Do not let this book of the law depart from your mouth. 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 terrified. Do not be discouraged. For the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.

So Joshua ordered the officers of the people, go through the camp and tell the people, get your supplies 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.

And then in the New Testament in the Gospel of Matthew, Matthew chapter 28, the concluding paragraph of Matthew's Gospel, verse 16.

[2 : 44] Matthew 28 and 16. Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshipped him, but some doubted.

Then Jesus came to them and said, All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.

And surely I am with you always to the very end of the age. Amen. And may God add his blessing to the reading of his word.

Let us pray. Our Heavenly Father, we bow in your presence, asking that your word be our rule, your spirit our teacher, and your greater glory, our supreme concern, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen. We live in changing days. And the pace of change, in fact, seems to get faster and faster.

- [4 : 02] Many years ago, a man called Alvin Toffler wrote a book on the speed of life. And it was called Future Shock. And in that book, Toffler tells how the changes around us come faster and faster.
- We live in changing days. And the changes are in all aspects of life. Technology, political, economic, social, technological change.
- When I was at Strathbide University, I actually, as part of the maths course, did computer programming. I never saw a computer.
- Back in these days, Strathbide University had one computer. computer. And us students weren't going to be allowed anywhere near it. We simply had to learn this complicated computer language.
- And now, of course, computers are all pervasive, changing even our language. Or, some of you will be able to remember, when a telephone was a big black thing, with a dial that you pulled round, and then let go, and it worked back round, and then you pulled it back round, and it worked back round, until you got the number you wanted.
- [5 : 23] Now, we, of course, are into the days of the smartphone, and if your phone's more than a couple of years old, it's probably out of date.
- Technological change. Political change. The world, in our lifetime, has been redrawn from the collapse of communism to the forging of the European community.
- And now, of course, in our day, Russia seeking to redraw the political geography of Europe once again. Political change.
- All around us. Economic change. The economic map and the standard of living are changing. When I was young, fitted carpets were a luxury for the few.
- As was television. I well remember when the first television arrived in our street, and everybody had to go and see this wonderful new marvel of this grainy, flickering, black and white picture.
- [6 : 37] Holidays abroad was something for the very few. The economic changes of our lifestyle. The social map has changed.
- Today, our society takes us normal, moral values that would have horrified even 20 years ago. And the church has changed.
- In my lifetime, Scotland has moved from a large percentage of the population being in church on a Sunday to a small percentage of the population being in church on a Sunday.
- I was minister at one of the church extension charges in East School Bride, and just before I went, there were over 1,500 children in the Sunday school.
- Try and get your heads around that. 1,500 children in the Sunday school. It was a nightmare organising the Sunday school annual outing.
- [7 : 47] Can you imagine how many buses you needed for 1,500 children along with their teachers and parents and so on? Changes.
- Change can be good, but it can also be bad. One thing that is true is that change brings uncertainty.
- The companion of change is uncertainty. Yet, in the midst of changes, some things remain certain and unchanging.
- And, indeed, without some enduring qualities, we are adrift on a notion of hedonistic indulgence, and life loses meaning and significance.
- And so, I want to share with you some thoughts this morning from the book of Joshua, which I hope will be a word of encouragement for us. But, just before we get into Joshua, a couple of verses from Scripture, one from the Old, one from the New Testament.

[8 : 55] In Malachi, three and six, we are told, I, the Lord, do not change. And in Hebrews 13 and eight, we are told, Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

We live in a changing world. Some changes good, some changes not so good. But, whatever the changes, we have an unchanging God.

God. And in a special way, I believe, the book of Joshua sets that theme before us of an unchanging God. Just remember the background to the book of Joshua.

We have the transition, of course, at the beginning of the book, of the leadership of the people of God from Moses to Joshua. Joshua. It's a period in which the people of God are living through great change and uncertainty.

And the book of Joshua, of course, continues into the rest of the Old Testament from the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible. And the people of God were about to go through a whole change of lifestyle and location.

[10 : 15] Remember, for 40 years they've been wandering, they've had a nomadic existence in the desert and they're going to go into the promised land and settle down to rural prosperity.

A whole radical change of lifestyle and location. The key change of leader. Moses, who had led them so wonderfully for 40 years, was gone to be replaced by Joshua.

Can you just imagine some of the people saying amongst themselves, well, things are going to be different now because God was really with Moses in a wonderful way, wasn't he?

The Red Sea parted, water from the rock, manna from heaven. Joshua's not going to be the same. And so God speaks to Joshua in a manner that underlines it.

Whatever the uncertainties, whatever the changes, he does not change. When you go through Joshua, you find, sort of reiterated for us, many great continuities.

[11 : 25] The principle of saving faith in the story of Jericho and Rahab, who is saved out of the fall of that city. The principle of living by faith in the story of the crossing of the Jordan.

Jerusalem. Interestingly, the importance of the sacraments as a reminder to the people of the unchanging promises of God. Because the sacraments in the Old Testament of circumcision and Passover are carefully put into place in chapter 5.

But overarching the whole story of the book of Joshua, the Lord who does not change. But I want to pick out of that first chapter three areas which show us the unchanging things of God.

The unchanging power of God, the unchanging presence of God, and the unchanging authority of God. First, the unchanging power of God.

When Moses led Israel out of Egypt, there was a great miracle of the crossing of the Red Sea. That was a defining moment when the people of God were free from slavery in Egypt.

[12 : 46] And now under Joshua, Israel stands in the bank of the Jordan. A Jordan that we are told is in flood. And a barrier to their entry into the promised land.

And right away we are reminded of the power and the sovereignty of the living God. In Joshua chapter 1 verse 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. The land I am about to give to them.

And that is a statement of God's power. What happens in history happens because God is sovereign. The land was his, his to dispose of.

And the sovereign power of God becomes clear as we read on, particularly as we go into chapters 3 and 4. What do we find that God tells Joshua to do?

[13 : 53] He tells Joshua to tell the priests to pick up the ark of the covenant, to walk into the water carrying the ark. And can't you just hear some of the Israelites saying to one another, what's Joshua on about here?

This is a daft way to get across the river. Priests carrying the ark and walking into the river and getting their feet wet. It won't work. We should be looking for wood to build rafts or bridges or something to get across the river.

But Joshua of course was simply obeying the word of God. And God was simply demonstrating that just as he had been with Moses in power, so he was now with Joshua. Joshua chapter 3 verse 7.

And this is in connection with the instructions to cross the Jordan that God gives to Joshua. Joshua 3 and 7.

The Lord said to Joshua, Today I will begin to exalt you in the eyes of all Israel, so that they may know that I am with you as I was with Moses.

[15 : 07] And then the rest of chapter 3 and into chapter 4 gives us the details of the people of God crossing the river Jordan. And then in chapter 4 at verse 14, That day the Lord exalted Joshua in the sight of all Israel, and they revered him all the days of his life, just as they had revered Moses.

And note here of course the strong sense of continuity in the midst of change. God saying, I am with you Joshua, as I was with Moses.

The leadership may change, but God does not. And God was going to be with Joshua in power, enabling the people to cross over the river Jordan and into the promised land.

man. In Joshua chapter 4 at verse 24, we are told that God did this so that all the peoples of the earth might know that the hand of the Lord is powerful, and so that you might always fear the Lord your God.

And so we see the unchanging power of God from Moses to Joshua. Under Moses, the Red Sea parted under Joshua.

[16 : 28] The people crossed over the Jordan. Interestingly, later in the Old Testament, there's a parallel to this, a very close parallel, and the transfer of prophetic leadership from Elijah to Elisha.

If you remember the story of Elijah, towards the end of his life, he's caught up to heaven in a chariot of fire. But just before that, Elijah has come to the river Jordan, and he's smoked the edge of the water with his cloak, and the waters are parted, and he crosses over the Jordan.

And then he's caught up in the chariot of fire to heaven, and Elisha's standing there, and he goes and picks up the cloak of Elijah and goes back to the Jordan and says, where is the God of Elijah?

And touches the water with the cloak, and the waters pass part, and he passes across to the other side. So whether it be from Moses to Joshua, or Elijah to Elisha, the power of God is unchanging.

the personnel might change, but God's power and authority does not. At the end of Matthew's gospel, we read that Jesus came to them and said, all authority in heaven and earth has been given to me.

[18 : 05] Not to political dictators, or business magnates, or whoever. all authority says, Jesus is given to me.

In the midst of all the changes and uncertainties of life, God is still the same. The God who is there, the God who is working out his sovereign people.

And that's true whether the people of God are prosperous, or whether they are suffering. When the people of God were in Egypt, God was still in control.

When later in the New Testament, the people of God were in exile in Babylon, God was still in control. In China, in 1942, the mission school of Shefu was overrun by the Japanese.

The children were told to collect what they could carry and assemble in the playground to be marched off to a prison camp. And as they were being marched away under the guns of the Japanese, and quite unprompted by their teachers, the children began to sing an old chorus which some of you may know.

[19 : 26] God is still on the throne, and he will remember his own. Though trials may press us, and burdens distress us, he will never leave us alone.

God is still on the throne, and he will remember his own. His promise is true, he will not forget you. God is still on the throne.

And these children sang that as they were marched off to prison camp. The unchanging power and sovereignty of God.

God is still on the throne, and he will remember his own. And then secondly, we note from Joshua, the unchanging presence of God.

One of the great promises of scripture is God's promise to be with his people. In Joshua 1, verse 5, As I was with Moses, so I will be with you.

[20 : 26] I will never leave you, nor forsake you. And that's repeated for Joshua's encouragement down in verse 9.

Do not be terrified, do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go. What a tremendous encouragement that must have been to Joshua.

This word from the Lord, that he would be with him. A tremendous encouragement to know that in the midst of the changes, the uncertainties, God was there.

God is with us. And that is a central and recurring theme throughout scripture. Isaiah 43 and 2, When you pass through the waters, I will be with you.

The gospel of Matthew begins and ends with an assurance of God's presence with us. Matthew chapter 1, verse 23, The virgin will be with child.

[21 : 27] will give birth to a son and they will call him Emmanuel. Which means, God with us. And in the middle of Matthew's gospel, chapter 18, verse 20, Jesus says, Where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.

And at the end of the gospel, Matthew 28 and 20, And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.

And we need to lift our eyes beyond the horizon of the material and grasp this truth that God is there and God is with us and God is still on the throne.

Joshua reminds us of the unchanging power of God and the unchanging presence of God. He also reminds us of the unchanging authority of God.

In the midst of changing values and aspirations, God sets an unchanging authority before us in his word.

[22 : 33] God's moral rules do not change. Ten commandments are as relevant today as they were 3,000 years ago. And God reminds Joshua that he is to live within the circle of his word.

Verse 7 and 8 of chapter 1. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you. Do not turn from it to the right or to the left.

Do not let this book of the law depart from your mouth. Meditate on it day and night so that you may be careful to do everything written in it.

Now, there's lots of things there. Just let me pick out two or three. First of all, Joshua is told do not turn from it.

But sadly, all too often that is what the people of God have done. There's what I find a very sad verse in Jeremiah 6 and 16.

[23 : 40] And it reads as follows. This is what the Lord says. Stand at the crossroads and look. Ask for the ancient paths. Ask where the good way is and walk in it and you will find rest for your souls.

And we think, yeah, right, that's fine. But the end of that verse is, but you said, we will not walk in it. This isn't the pagan outsider.

This is the people of God. And God saying to them, here is my way, and the people of God saying, we will not walk in it. And sadly, that can still be true in the church today.

Do not turn from it. John Calvin says, the Bible is the scepter by which the heavenly king rules his church.

And we're not to turn from it. We have to meditate on it. Joshua's told to meditate on it, to read it, to think it through, to get to grips with it.

[24 : 56] And that is a challenge to live within the circle of God's word. But to be able to live within the circle of God's word, we need to know God's word. How careful are we not just in reading God's word, but in studying God's word, and meditating God's word, and chewing it over.

There's a commentator that I like, a Dutch man called William Hendrickson, and he actually wrote a book on Bible study. And he said, anyone who cannot off, any Christian, who cannot off the top of his head give an outline of every book of the Bible, is not taking the Bible seriously enough.

Now, that hits home with me. I could give you an outline off the top of my head of a lot of books of the Bible, but I couldn't give you an outline of every book of the Bible, which means, according to Hendrickson, I am not taking the Bible seriously enough.

How would you do at giving an outline of at least half a dozen books of the Bible, never mind 66 of them?

How seriously do we take God's Word? How deeply do we meditate upon it? Well, don't turn from it, meditate on it, chew it over, get it into your being.

[26 : 37] Joshua's told, be careful to do everything written in it. It takes us back to that parable, doesn't it, of the rock and the sand. And just let me remind you of it, Matthew 7 verse 24, Jesus says, everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock.

The rain came down, the streams rose and the winds blew and beat against that house, yet it did not fall, because it had its foundations in the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice, is like a foolish man who built his house in sand.

The rain came down, the streams rose and the winds blew and beat against that house and it fell with a great crash. The Australian commentator Leon Morris notes, the Bible was the only book Jesus ever quoted and then never as a basis for discussion but only to decide the point at issue.

Jesus said, do not think that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets. I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. Calvin again, he said, the Lord does not shine upon us except when we take his word as our light.

Scotland used to be known as the land of the book. For many years I was involved with what was then the National Bible Society of Scotland and it was actually quite embarrassing at times when folk came from abroad and had this idea of Scotland still today as the land of the book.

[28 : 27] But that's sadly not true, is it? But perhaps it could be but if it was to be again then it must start with us.

About 70 years ago an old retired miner asked his grandson who was a close friend of mine and had the same name as me oddly enough and he said, John have you read through the Bible yet?

And my friend who was still a teenager replied, oh no, he loved reading, but the idea of reading hundreds of pages of small print in the Bible seemed an impossibly dreary task.

Well advised the old man, you should. One day by the grace of God you'll be in heaven. And the man may come up to you there and ask, was the old book much help to you down on earth?

And of course you'll say yes. But then the man might say, well my name's Habakkuk, the Lord gave me part of his word to write. How did what I wrote help you?

[29 : 35] Now said the old man to his grandson, how would you have to feel if you have to say, oh well I never really bothered with that bit of the Bible. Now the old man belonged to the old Scotland.

He had left school when he was ten, scarcely able to read and write. he worked in the pits, became a hard-living, hard-drinking, gambling miner. But then he was converted and as a Christian re-taught himself to read.

The Bible became his main reading and never a day would pass but he would read chapter after chapter of his Bible. Not only his main reading, it was his main joy.

And it was my friend's first challenging introduction to really get to grips with the Bible for himself. And perhaps as a thought to challenge us, one day in heaven a man may come up to you and say my name's Habakkuk or Zephaniah or Obadiah or Malachi.

How did what I write help you? To come back to Joshua, it seems to me this is very much a book with a message for us today.

[30 : 55] Because here we find the unchanging certainty of God in the midst of the changing uncertainties of life. And that is surely an encouragement.

So in the midst of change, let us rejoice in the unchanging things of God. In the midst of uncertainty, let us hold on to that which is certain.

The power of God. God is there. God is still on the throne and he will remember his own. The presence of God, God with us, to encourage and to guide and to comfort and the authority of God in Scripture.

God setting a standard before us to follow and to obey. Let me just finish with a story from the life of Gladys Aylwer.

Her story is fairly well known, partly on account of the film telling of her epic journey with a group of children, although she was quite upset that the film had the children singing nursery rhymes when in fact there was Bible choruses at the side.

[32 : 11] But the background to that journey was the tensions in China around the communist takeover. Gladys set out on a journey of hundreds of miles over very rough terrain and with no transport. The journey would have been exhausting even in good conditions and with appropriate equipment, but there was no equipment and virtually no food, and they travelled for over two weeks until they nearly reached safety.

But after that long and arduous journey, they came to a final obstacle, an obstacle that Gladys could see no way to overcome, because they arrived at the river Yangtze.

Safety lay on the other side, but there was no way across. There were no bridges, and there were no boats, and the river was deep and wide, and there seemed no way to cross.

And so they lay down that night and slept, and in the morning Gladys, tells us that she was in the depth of despair, that having travelled all this way, this final barrier was insurmountable.

And one of the little girls, a girl called Sulan, came up to her, and with the innocence of a little child, asked Gladys if she believed in the story of Moses and the Red Sea.

[33 : 32] Of course, Gladys said, well, yes, she believed in the story of Moses and the Red Sea. And the wee girl then said, well, can't we cross the river like Moses? And Gladys tells us that her heart sank and she wailed, but I'm not Moses.

And then the wee girl said, yes, I know that, but is God not still God? And as Gladys gathered the children around her, they knelt and prayed, and as they did that, friendly forces the other side of the river saw them and sent boats over to take them to safety.

God is still on the throne, and he will remember his own. Let us pray. Father God, we thank you that you are an unchanging God, that you indeed are still on the throne, and whatever the confusing face of history, help us to look to you, and know that you are sovereign, and that you will indeed work out your purposes for the good of your people.

And we pray, our Father, that we will be encouraged as we know that you journey with us day by day, and help us, we pray, to be a people of your word, the Bible.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.