

Stories Are Powerful

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[0 : 00] Well, I'd like us to turn back to Joshua, the first chapter of Joshua. A recent research paper about two books, two books which I don't have in my library, so I can't hold them up as props, but two books, Harry Potter and Twilight.

The researchers found that if you get people to read a couple of chapters of Harry Potter, then they will rate themselves higher in their ability to move something with their mind than those who didn't. And if you get people to read just a couple of chapters of Twilight, they will believe that their teeth are marginally longer than the general population, just like the vampires in the book.

And so, what does this prove to us, apart from that some books might make you sillier? It proves to us that stories are very powerful, that stories are things which shape us as people.

They shape how we think about the world. They shape what we identify with. And what I would like us to do this morning is to look at the epic story of Joshua and the children of Israel conquering the land of Canaan.

[1 : 14] And what I would like us to do is not just look at this story and derive some application from it, but what I would like us to do is look through this story at our present circumstances. The author, Francis Schaeffer, identified the book of Joshua as a bridge book.

What he meant by that was that it is a bridge between the wandering in the desert and the settling in the land. That there is explicit areas of continuity between the end of Deuteronomy and the beginning of the chronicles of the history of Israel.

Now, what other book in the Bible could we identify as a bridge book? The other book that we read, the Acts of the Apostles, which is a bridge between the ministry of Jesus and the ministry of the church, the time that we now live.

Now, both books show a mission. Joshua to occupy and to bring Canaan into conformity to the will of God, to fulfill the promises that God has made, and Acts to go into all the world and to spread the kingdom of God among all people.

Which means that Joshua and Acts have a relationship and that perhaps we can learn something from Joshua that would teach us about our present circumstances, particularly in the context of evangelism.

[2 : 37] That perhaps when we go and we share the gospel with others, if we try and be intentional about our relationships in leading people to Jesus, that we would perhaps identify with the story of Joshua.

And so to do that, we're going to look at three elements. The first is we're going to look at the command of Israel to arise and to take the land. Two, the promise that God makes to be with them as they go.

And then finally, we're going to look at a tale of two people. We're going to compare two people, Rahab and Achan. Rahab is just in chapter two of Joshua.

Achan is immediately after the story of Jericho, which is a story that we all know. So the first part, Israel arise. So Israel to come, go and take the land.

So in Joshua, we find the continuity of the promises that God made to Abraham. Earlier in the Bible, back in the book of Genesis, we have an account of the life of Abraham, where Abraham, a childless old man, is promised by God that he will make his descendants a great nation.

[3 : 48] By the time we get to Joshua, this is something that is already true. They have already become a great nation. They have escaped the great power of Egypt.

They have defeated the Amorite kings, and they now stand ready to possess the land and to take across the Jordan. Now, God said to Abraham that I will make them a great nation, that he would himself have a unique covenant relationship with them, that through them, or that he would bless

them, and that through them he would make them a blessing to others, and that he would be their God, and that they would be his people.

And this too is something that's already fulfilled by this time. God has led them and was among them for this whole time as they were coming out of Egypt and wandering in the desert.

So the third component of the promise to Abraham was that God would give them Canaan. As an everlasting possession, he showed Abraham the land, and he said to them, I will give this to your descendants.

And more than 400 years later, Joshua is told to lead the children of Abraham over the Jordan.

Abraham never got to see this promise fulfilled, and it was fulfilled long after God had buried him.

[5 : 07] And so Joshua is this bridge between the time of wandering and the time of settlement in the land. Joshua the man has been waiting for this moment most of his life. He too at this point is like an old man.

Remember, Joshua was among the 12 original spies who were sent by Moses into the land of Canaan. They were sent to get a full story of what was going on in the land, to spy out the geography, the population, the strongholds, and bring samples of the produce.

Perhaps you'd remember the story of when the spies return and they bring this huge cluster of grapes. Ten of the spies said the task of taking Canaan was impossible, that people were just too strong for them.

Yet Joshua and Caleb, his companion, believed that they could take it, and they tried and failed to convince the others that God would give them the land. So the people refused, and rather than take the opportunity that was right there in front of them, they doubted God and they wandered.

And all of the adult males of that generation fell and died in the desert. Ten of the spies were struck down with disease, and only Joshua and Caleb survived.

[6 : 24] So the people had waited a long time to see the promises of God fulfilled. Forty years they spent in the wilderness, and most of the people at this point who were going to take the land were born in those wilderness years, and the desert was all that they were used to.

But things were about to change. So Joshua, Moses' successor, leads the conquering of the land. He takes this leadership role in obedience to God's command.

In verse 8 of Joshua chapter 1, the book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do all that is written in it.

For then you will make your way prosperous, and you will have good success. So to Joshua, the word of God was not to be a relic. It was not an artifact to be stored up in the Ark of the Covenant, never to be touched, never to be read or handled.

But the word of God was to be known by him. The people were to hear the word of God being read aloud, which is a practice that we still carry out today.

[7 : 34] There was continuity between Moses and with Joshua. Moses may be dead, but the words that he wrote were not just packed away. And why weren't they just packed away?

It's because those words are unique. There was nothing else like them. Now recently I got married, and Lois had her wedding dress professionally cleaned after the marriage.

And when it was given to us, when we brought it home, it was given to us in this enormous box. It was a huge box. And opening it up, there was this A4 paper detailing instructions on how we were to care for it, how we were to turn it once per year, how we were to make new folds and new creases, how to place it in special pH-neutral paper so that it doesn't yellow over time.

And all of these details for something that is likely going to live in our loft for the rest of our lives.

This isn't what Joshua did to the Bible, the first five books at least.

Joshua accepted it as the Word of God because he was there at Mount Sinai. He was Moses' assistant. He was waiting for Moses as he was receiving instructions from God.

[8 : 49] He was there. He could smell the smoke. And so he accepted this as the unique Word of God. And so the Bible is our authority partly because it's unique.

There is nothing else like it. It is breathed out by God. You know, when Jesus rebuked the Pharisees, he quoted Moses and he held them to account as if the words of Moses had been spoken to them.

And the Bible still speaks directly to us. It is the Word of God to you in your life and there is nothing else like it.

The book of the law shall not depart from your mouth. You see, the people ended their time of wandering in the desert, but it did not end their commitment to the authority of the Word of God. And so when we think about ourselves in our present circumstance, as we go and fulfill the Great Commission, we always must remember that the Bible is our central and final authority in all things. That it is something which is to be in us at all times as we go out. It is to shape everything that we do. Now, what I would like us to see is this parallel between this book, which is a bridge between the wandering and the settlement, to the book of Acts, and the ministry of Jesus, and the ministry of the church.

[10:08] In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus said, Thus it is written that Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations beginning at Jerusalem.

So rather than starting on the outside and going into the land, so there's some contrast here, they were to start on the inside and they were to break out into the nations.

You see, in the book of Acts, the whole world is Canaan. The proclamation of the Gospel is that there was one who took all judgment on himself. You see, judgment came to the people of Canaan for their evil, but our message is that there is one who has taken all the condemnation, that there was one who has already suffered the consequences, that there was one who suffered and who died and who rose again victorious.

Our message is that the battle has already been won. The world is already Christ's. He is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.

The world is his. Canaan was already God's. Joshua just had to be on God's side to take it. Jesus made the world his. And the people are not driven out before Jesus, but rather any who come to Jesus in faith are brought from judgment, from condemnation, into righteousness, into fellowship with God.

[11:38] You see, Moses had to die and Joshua had to take his place and fight the battle on God's side. But in Acts, Jesus dies, Jesus rose, and Jesus has already won the battle.

And our proclamation is that there is one who has won the battle for us. So this leads us to point two. If it's true that there is a way that we can look at Joshua in our present circumstances, then what other continuity is there in our day?

God gives Joshua a mission. Go over this Jordan, you and all this people, into the land that I am giving to them, to the people of Israel. And he gives a promise in verse five, just as I was with Moses, so I will be with you.

The mission of God was to be carried out in his presence. Again and again, God calls on Joshua to be strong and courageous. Be strong and courageous.

Do not be frightened and do not be dismayed for the Lord, your God, is with you wherever you go. God is saying, I was with Moses. You are my witness to that.

[12:47] Joshua saw the plagues in Egypt. He saw the parting of the Red Sea, the pillar of cloud that rested by day, the pillar of fire by night. You see, God broke into history dramatically.

And he made a covenant with Abraham and he delivered his descendants from bondage and he settled them in the land. The Lord spoke to Moses personally. And now we have the Lord speaking to Joshua personally, telling him to be courageous and to obey his word.

Obedience is a central theme of Joshua. Not only just to know the Bible, but to also obey. We perhaps know Joshua from his saying later in the book of Joshua, as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.

You see, God tells Joshua that without obedience to the commands of God, Israel cannot be successful. Only be strong and very courageous. Be careful to do according to all the law that Moses, my servant, commanded you.

Do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may have good success wherever you go. Joshua has the Torah, has the first five books on which he can meditate day and night.

[14:02] As he walks with God daily, he can take courage knowing the fact that he is walking with God because he knows the word. If there's something that we can take from the life of Joshua is that as we go into the world and we tell people about Jesus, if we're in need of courage, if we want our way to prosper, then we want to know the presence of God in our lives as we walk in obedience to him.

So what do we mean by the presence of God? The opening of Joshua is God speaking directly to him and there are great miracles in this book.

And you might say, well, this isn't my experience. I don't know God speaking to me directly and I don't see miracles taking place. But the whole point is that this is supposed to be extraordinary. It's supposed to be something that's different to get your attention.

And God isn't always so visible. And the hiddenness of God is a reality in our lives and is a reality in the book of Joshua. But we do have the internal experience of the presence of God in us.

Now, this is something that we grasp to a fuller extent than in the time of Joshua because as we read in the book of Acts, the Holy Spirit is sent to dwell with us as individuals.

[15:20] He resides in the heart of believers. The Holy Spirit sets apart us for God. He cleanses us from sin. The Holy Spirit is alive in us and he gives us an awareness of the glory of God so that when we read the word, when we sing praises to him, when we worship him, we can sense and know the presence of God in our lives and we can look at wonder at who God is.

To know God in a way which animates us to worship. Now, just as Moses did when he encountered the presence of God, he fell in worship and that should be our response just like the prophet Isaiah or Moses or Joshua.

When we encounter God, it should cause us to be in awe to the sense of the glory of God in us. So experiencing the presence of God, that's something that can give us assurance.

It's a kind of assurance that makes us a witness, a witness that we are called to be, an assurance that we have been saved from our sin and from judgment by the work of Jesus in our lives.

As one preacher put it, he asked the question, are you an advocate or are you a witness? You see, Jesus says, you are my witnesses. When we tell others about Jesus, are we just arguing a case like an advocate, like a barrister?

[16:47] Or are we weighing up probabilities? Are we advancing a philosophical position? Or are you a witness to the work of God in your life? And perhaps this is one of the most practical points with regards to evangelism today is that when we're one-on-one with people, we should know that God has promised to be with us and that we are in fact witnesses to God being at work today.

Now, point three, when we consider this book of Joshua, it's very tempting to just see judgment as the dominant theme. However, when we come to chapter two, verse one of chapter two, we discover this person called Rahab.

And the first story that we have in Joshua is a story of the mercy of God. It's not a story of judgment, it's a story of mercy. And we find a person, Rahab, who did not have the promises of God.

She was a foreigner, she was a Gentile, and not only that, but she was a prostitute. And yet God set her apart for himself. You see, God brought her not only into the covenant with Abraham, but he also brought her into the messianic line.

You can read about this in Matthew's genealogy. You can see that Rahab is listed as being in the family tree of Jesus. And so we have this story of mercy at the beginning of Joshua.

[18:11] So spies are sent out, only two this time rather than 12, and they come to her house. You see, God brought them to Rahab. Now, when we go into the world, we should recognize that we are going into a world where God is at work.

Not only is God at work in us, making us a witness to his power, but that God is at work in the lives of other people. There are people in our community that we know, in our workplace, other areas in our lives, where people are ready to receive the gospel, that God has been preparing them.

And these people may look nothing like us, just like Rahab looks nothing like the children of Israel. They may be totally different. They may be messed up in all kinds of sin. And yet the power of God could be at work in their life to bring them to him and to make them more like Jesus.

So Rahab is an example to us. She's an example of the mercy of God and bringing people into the covenant who otherwise don't look like they belong there. And she's an example of faith and courage.

Rahab demonstrates the kind of faith that God asks of Joshua in our text, a faith that is leading to obedience. As someone who would have known so little of the promises of God, she would have known so little about the law of God.

[19:33] She may have heard some of the stories about God, of the Jews, as they were pressing closer and closer to the borders of her land. But with very little knowledge, Rahab was faithful.

She obeyed with the little knowledge that she had and she acted courageously. She obeys God by acting courageously and she risked everything. It wasn't a risk-free act that she did by hiding the spies.

Because can you imagine what the authorities would have done to her and to her family if they found out that she was collaborating with the Jewish spies? You see, every day we make choices and we often expect obedience to be something that's only really important in the big things. That when we have a big decision or a major temptation comes our way, then you do the right thing and then everything's all good. You're in the clear. But it is in fact the everyday choices that we make to tell the truth, to do the right thing, that's where it counts. Otherwise, it's death by a thousand cuts. You know, people typically don't leave the church because of one major failure in their life. It's often the small decisions that lead them further and further from Jesus.

[20 : 47] As Jesus said in Matthew 7, enter by the narrow gate for the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction and those who enter by it are many.

For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life and those who find it are few. You see, the road to godly living is difficult. But we see here that God is merciful, that God acts in the life of Rahab, that he uses the spies as a means by which she is saved from the judgment that was coming upon the people.

Now, let's contrast this with the story of Achan. Achan is a lesser known story. A few pages over in chapter 7, if you scroll over to chapter 7, you can perhaps read that.

We maybe don't have time for that this morning. But, as they crossed the Jordan, the city of Jericho was taken and the next main story is the disobedience of Achan, the defeat at Ai.

And this time it's not a story of a foreigner, but as someone who's already in the congregation of God's people, one of her own, shall we say. In chapter 7, we are told that Achan, he took the spoils of war, which perhaps is something you might expect to happen.

[22 : 03] Spoils of war was a common thing in the ancient world and so he may have thought, well, this is acceptable. But these things were devoted to God and so he disobeyed God, he lied, and he put these stolen goods away with his own belongings and as a result, when the children of Israel went from Jericho to fight another battle to take the city of Ai, they failed.

And they were defeated. Now eventually, there's a quite detailed way that they find this out, but eventually Achan is discovered to be the one who has sinned.

He has taken a bar of gold, some silver, and a Babylonian cloak. He was a man whose heart was not right with God. And he was a man who when the opportunity for obedience or disobedience came, he chose disobedience.

He gave in to temptation, he gave in to his covetousness, covetousness, he coveted his wealth, and he valued material things more than God.

He was worldly, he was more concerned about the prestige, you know, Babylonian merchandise, Babylon was this great empire at the time that they were very trendy, I suppose, would be a modern term.

[23 : 19] Well, he valued this prestige more than he was concerned about the things of God. And so the story of Achan is a story of God's judgment, a judgment towards someone who's in the congregation, as the other side of the coin to the story of Rahab, someone who was outside and who was brought in.

You see, Achan on the outside looked like everyone else, and his sin was invisible to everyone around him. But his sin became visible in its effects to everyone around him.

He broke the faith, and he was judged, and the story ends with his execution. So it's a warning that we should never be complacent with sin in our lives.

You see, Rahab shows us that God's kingdom is open to any and all who put their faith in God, and that we have a responsibility to go and to share the gospel. Achan is a warning that those who are already in the congregation should be watchful to keep the faith.

Now, I'll close by just looking at the name of Joshua. So, Joshua is the English form of the Hebrew, which means the Lord is salvation. Now, what is the English form of the Greek term the Lord is salvation?

[24 : 36] It's Jesus. They're actually, in fact, the same name, which is why if you read in the old authorised version in Hebrews chapter 4, verse 8, it says, when it's clearly talking about Joshua, it says, for if Jesus had given them rest, when actually modern translations render it Joshua, just to

avoid the confusion.

So, the name Joshua and Jesus are, in fact, interchangeable. Now, Joshua leads forth the children of Israel into Canaan to bring it into conformity of God, but we have an even greater champion, Jesus, who has redeemed us and who has brought us into his kingdom with a mission to reach sinners.

So, it may be the case that people who read a couple of chapters of Harry Potter may be more likely to think that they can move objects just with the power of their minds. But what will our response be when we read the book of Joshua?

Perhaps it will be an opportunity for us to identify with Joshua, that we will see that God is present with us in our lives, that when we are walking in obedience to him, when we know his presence in our lives, that we can be effective witnesses to the gospel, that the whole world is open to receiving the gospel, that Rahab shows us that people who may not look like they belong in the kingdom, in fact, are people who God has been at work in their lives.

So, the whole world is Canaan and we have a great king who is already victorious and he will be with us wherever we go. Amen.

[26 : 10] May God bless his words to us.