

Be Strong

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Date: 11 May 2015

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[0 : 00] Good morning everyone. My name is James, I'm the student minister here at St. Paul's. It's a joy to be here this morning to preach to you our last sermon in the series on Joshua, Be Strong. So I've got about 15 chapters to kind of summarize for you this morning, so strap yourselves in and we'll get into it. But if you could have open 23 and 24 there, but also flick back to chapter 9 and we'll start from there this morning.

But before we do that, let's pray. Heavenly Father, we give you great thanks and praise that we get to gather as your people this morning.

We thank you so much that as your people we can sit under your word and have you teach us, that we can be more like your son Jesus. And we do pray, Lord, as we finish up our time in Joshua and we see what it is to be strong and courageous, Lord, would we be able to go out from here, change and different to serve you well and to face the world of sin and to face the world full of suffering and pain, but be strong and courageous in your son, in whose name we pray. Amen.

We've been going throughout Joshua and we've seen a God who is mighty and powerful, who gives victory to the Israelites, delivering their enemies into their hands. These are nations that we are told in chapter 23, verse 9, were strong and great.

But God had driven them from the land. He had fought the battle for little Israel. And this is the basis for which he tells his people to be strong and courageous, for he is the one doing the fighting.

[1 : 40] And as long as Israel remained faithful to the God that they serve and worship, he would fight for them. And today, as we sum up our time in Joshua, we will see on what basis that we have to be strong and faithful, to be strong and courageous.

And we'll be left with the very question of who we will serve. However, before we get there, let's spend some time back in chapter 9, looking at one of the final sections, or the most final battles and sections of this book.

So the opening verses of chapter 9, verse 1. Now when all the kings west of Jordan heard about these things, the kings in the hill country, in the western foothills, and along the entire coast of the Mediterranean Sea, as far as Lebanon, the kings of the Hittites, Amorites, and Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Debuchadnezzar, they came together to wage war against Joshua and Israel.

The kingdoms that surrounded them had been paying close attention to what had been happening. They knew what had happened at the Battle of Ai and at the Battle of Jericho.

They knew the history of God's people, that they had been brought up out of Egypt. But this is the first time in the whole book that we see the kingdoms go on the offensive, joined together before there is any imminent attack against them.

[2 : 56] But why? Why do they do this? It may be because they're fearful. The God of Israel is unstoppable, delivering every city into Israel's hands.

It's a good conclusion. But there is nothing in the text to suggest or to indicate that they were fearful at this point. In fact, this change of character, going on the offensive, might suggest that their disposition towards Israel has changed.

No longer were they fearful, but they had hope. They had heard not only about Israel's victories, but also Israel's loss at Ai.

And even though it was only a hiccup along the way, the surrounding nations saw that Israel were vulnerable. Israel were no longer considered undefeated.

They lost a battle. And so they thought to themselves, maybe, maybe we can gather up all our armies and we can defeat Israel together. However, it seems to be a misplaced hope.

[4 : 01] It says they came together to fight Joshua and Israel. No mention of God. They don't realize that there is the God of Joshua and Israel who does the fighting, not them on their own.

And so they show that they don't truly understand what they are getting themselves into. However, one city, Gibeon, does something else. In verse 3, we are told that after hearing about Jericho and Ai, Gibeon planned to deceive Israel into a peace treaty.

And they went to great lengths to make themselves look like a faraway nation, to look like they had traveled great distances to get to their camp, to get to the Israelite camp. They loaded worn-out sacks on their donkeys, worn a wall, worn-out sandals as well.

They made sure all their bread looked dry, so they looked like they had come from a very faraway land and had traveled for quite some time. They went to great lengths to deceive Israel.

I mean, I don't know if I could ever be bothered to go to such lengths to cover up the lie. As a kid, the only kind of defense I had to cover up the lie was to try and keep a straight face.

[5 : 08] If I could lie with a straight face, maybe I would get away with it, but I never really did at all. But these people, the Gibeonites, they had a great reason to lie and to try and deceive.

In verse 9, they said to Joshua, Unlike the other kings, the Gibeonites knew they didn't stand a chance, because they knew what they were up against.

Unlike the kings who thought they were up against Joshua, the Gibeonites recognized that they were up against God. Look again. Because of the fame of the Lord your God, we have heard reports of him.

All that he did in Egypt, and all that he did to the two kings of the Amorites. They knew what was up. They knew that they could not stand against Israel.

To stand against Israel was to stand against God. And they would rather make peace of Israel through deception than stand against them and fight this mighty and powerful God.

[6 : 33] And it totally paid off. Look at verse 14. We see again how vulnerable Israel is.

Not only can they be defeated in battle by a small outpost at Ai, but they can also be completely deceived by the enemy. When Israel put God offside, not giving him his worthy place as God and ruler, they make themselves vulnerable.

And there's almost an expectation at this point that something bad might happen. that the Gibeonites may not have been genuine about their reasons for deception.

Well, it didn't take long. The deception began to unravel. And the Israelites found out that they had been tricked. And you can imagine how the Israelites would have been feeling to be tricked into a peace treaty with a Canaanite nation.

They're sworn enemies. Not cool. Not cool, Gibeon. And we are told in verse 18 that the people who are murmuring about them, and in verse 26, that the people, Israel, wanted to kill them.

[7 : 54] And you can imagine why. This is a potentially dangerous nation. And they have deceived Israel. What if their plans were to invade and destroy Israel from the inside through this deception?

And so Joshua asked them, Why? Why did you do these things? To which they respond in verse 24. Your servants were clearly told how the Lord your God had commanded his servant Moses to give you the whole land and to wipe out all its inhabitants from before you.

So we feared for our lives because of you. And that is why we did this. We are now in your hands. Do to us whatever seems good and right to you.

They hadn't deceived Israel to try and destroy Israel from the inside. They did so because they themselves were afraid of being destroyed by Israel, by God.

And they say, We are now in your hands. That is a recurring term that we hear in the book of Joshua. Normally it is God who says it to Joshua before he goes into battle to conquer an enemy.

[9 : 07] But now we hear the Gibeonites say it to Joshua of themselves. And it is as if they consider themselves like Ai and like Jericho to be conquered, to be a conquered city.

And so what will Joshua do? Verse 26. So Joshua saved them from the Israelites and they did not kill them.

Joshua mediates for the people of Gibeon and ensures their safety, showing grace. For even though the Gibeonites deceived the nation, their reasons were always genuine.

They feared the Lord God and so they were spared. What is the point of all this though? It is an interesting chapter.

On the one hand we have Gibeon, who while deceives Israel, shows that they have come to know and fearfully know the God they worship. And on the other hand we have Israel, who while they couldn't help being deceived, did not inquire God's counsel on the matter.

[10 : 13] And then we have God, who whilst he might not speak in the narrative, is clearly active in displaying grace to both. Grace to the Gibeonites in saving them and including them in.

And grace to Israel by not allowing another nation who may have abused their trust to deceive them and therefore to destroy them within. God is incredibly gracious in his actions, showing that he is the one who sustains his people and is able to sustain his people and achieve his purpose through them even when they are deceived.

For this deception in itself, in a way, kind of slingshots Israel into the conquest. You see, in the first eight chapters we have two battles. But from chapter 10 to halfway through 11, pretty much all the southern and northern kingdoms are conquered by them.

Things speed up very quickly. And it's all because of this deception. The other nations, after hearing about Gibeon's alliance of Israel, want to attack them right now.

Now, chapter 10, verse 3 says, So Adonis, king of Jerusalem, appealed to Hoham, king of Hebron, Piram, king of Jammuth, Japhia, king of Lachish, and Debir, king of Eglon.

[11 : 36] Come up and help me attack Gibeon, he said, because it has made peace with Joshua and the Israelites. This gave Israel a reason to enter back into the conquest, since they were obliged by their treaty to protect Gibeon.

And since all the kings had come together, this allowed Israel to swiftly defeat the other nations and end the conquest. To which we read in chapter 11, verse 23, The land was now theirs.

Because of this deception, it slingshot them to the rest of the conquest. And they were able to defeat all the surrounding nations, north and south. The land was now theirs.

It was finished. Now came the time to enjoy rest in the land that God promised to give them. Indeed, this is the purpose of the whole campaign.

That God's people would be in God's place, under God's rule, and enjoy rest. Rest with God. To enjoy the good land that Deuteronomy 8 spoke of, in verse 7.

[12 : 59] For the Lord your God is bringing you to a good land, a land with brooks, streams, deep springs, gushing out into the valleys and hills. A land with wheat and barley, vines and fig trees, pomegranates, olive oil and honey.

A land where bread will not be scarce, and you will lack nothing. A land where the rocks are iron, you can dig copper out of the hills. The description of springs, of waters gushing out of valleys and hills with plentiful produce and rich in minerals, is not just a description of the land they're about to enter into.

But it's also a description of a land that the people of God once were in. The Garden of Eden. I'll read out chapter 2 of Genesis.

See if you can pick up some similarities here. Now the Lord God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden. And there he put a man he had formed. The Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground.

Trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of knowledge and good and evil. A river, watering the garden, flowed from Eden.

[14 : 13] From there it was separated to four headwaters. The name of the first is Pishon. It winds through the entire land of Havilah, where there is gold.

And the gold of the land is good. Aromatic, resin, onyx are also there. The name of the second river is Gihon. It winds through the entire land of Cush. And the third river is the Tigris.

It runs along the east side of Asher. And the fourth river is the Euphrates. Do you see the similarities? The land that God was bringing them into was a reflection of the perfect garden that God's people had once enjoyed.

And more than that, that God would be with them in this good land himself. And that he, along with his people, would be able to enjoy his created purpose.

Rest. Rest with God. But, it was predicated upon Israel's obedience to God and remembrance for what he had done for them.

[15 : 20] One verse earlier in Deuteronomy 8, verse 6. Observe the command of the Lord your God, walking in obedience to him and revering him. And again, right after that description in verse 11.

Be careful that you do not forget the Lord your God. Obedience and remembrance were key for remaining in this good land and enjoying God and resting with him.

And so Joshua, to sum up the whole book, spends two chapters, 23 and 24, imploring the Israelites to remember God and to obey him.

23, verse 6. Be very strong. Be careful to obey all that is written in the book of the law of Moses. Without turning aside to the right or to the left.

So, firstly, he reminds them, as God reminded him in the beginning, to be strong and courageous. And that such strength and courage is based off obedience to God and to his law.

[16 : 22] He reminds them, it's actually God, not you, Israel, who defeated your enemies. Big and strong they were, yet nothing compared to the Lord God. And indeed, we have seen how incredibly vulnerable Israel are without God.

They cannot afford, even for a moment, to forget who they are and what God has done for them. They cannot afford to turn aside one way or the other from the word that is in the book of the law.

If they want to enjoy rest in the land, to enjoy a relationship as God's people, in God's place, under his rule, they must obey the Lord God to live rightly in the land he has given them.

And secondly, in chapter 24, we see Joshua leave the congregation of Israel with an important question to answer. One which we ourselves need to answer as well.

After recounting what the Lord had done for them since bringing them out of Egypt, he says in verse 14, Now fear the Lord and serve him in all faithfulness.

[17 : 31] Throw away the gods your ancestors worshipped beyond the Euphrates River and in Egypt and serve the Lord. But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living.

But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord. Will the people of God serve him alone as their Lord God or will they serve other gods?

The people respond resounding, yes, of course we will. Joshua, of course, God, he has done great things for us. And you would think Joshua would be pretty positive hearing that response.

But he's not. Verse 19, Joshua said to the people, you are not able to serve the Lord. He is a holy God. He is a jealous God.

He will not forgive your rebellion and your sins. A bit of a downer, really, isn't he? Calling them to serve God and saying, nope, you really can't serve him.

[18 : 42] What's going on here? Why is he being so negative? It's not that he's being negative or being a downer, but that he's being really, really serious.

He questions Israel's ability to fully commit themselves to the Lord and to abandon all other gods. Questioning whether they are single-mindedness.

He's being so negative or being a downer, but he's not convinced that they truly mean them. Saying in verse 20, if you forsake the Lord and serve foreign gods, he will turn and bring disaster on you and make an end of you after he has been good to you.

And in verse 23, calling them to do this, now then, said Joshua, throw away the foreign gods that are among you and yield your hearts to the Lord, the God of Israel.

Joshua is saying, you don't get it. This is serious. If you're going to serve God and make him Lord of your life, then do so. Forsake all else and serve him.

[19 : 52] Don't boast and say, oh, Joshua, of course we will. Of course we will. We love God. And then hold behind your back idols. No, Joshua wants them to understand the big commitment it is to follow God.

And what they promise is no small thing. To forsake all other gods and serve the one true God. And this is a question we must ask ourselves.

And what the book of Joshua gets us to ask ourselves. Do we take following God seriously? Are we single-minded in serving him alone?

Like the Israelites, we might think, yes, of course we do. We love God. But have we put away all our idols? Are we as a people truly single-minded in our devotion and love for God as Lord of our life?

Does worshipping and loving him come before work? Money, holidays, pleasure, our own families. Does worshipping and loving God, first and foremost, come before our own life?

[21 : 07] Can we truly say that right now, that there is not a moment in our life where God isn't number one? I'm not sure if I can say that. Can we really say that?

If we want to enjoy a relationship with God, then we are to obey and serve him. We must put him first.

We must serve him wholeheartedly, single-mindedly. But how can we do that if there are times we don't serve him wholeheartedly? When we kind of turn to the idols in our life and put them before God?

When we, like the Gibeonites, are caught out in our deception, in our inability to keep God's covenant? What are we to do? How can we communicate?

How can we continue to be a part of God's people? To enjoy the rich inheritance of rest with God in his place for us? Well, as we see throughout the whole book of Joshua, whilst God is an incredibly angry God who hates sin, who destroys those who are against him, we also witness a God who is gracious, who sustains his people even though they sin.

[22 : 28] He sustains them by his word. And although they are vulnerable, his people are weak in body and weak in mind, God enables them to remain in the land, to serve him and to love him.

And although we here, we are vulnerable without God, we are easily distracted by worldly things, God also promises us that he will sustain us by his word.

Indeed, as John 1 says, by the word that became flesh. It is Christ Jesus in whom we are able to be strong and courageous.

For just as God graciously included the Gibeonites into his own people, God in Christ graciously included us into his own people. Just as God fought the battles for the Israelites and delivered their enemies into their hands, God in Christ Jesus defeated our enemy of sin on the cross, by dying himself as our eternal sacrifice.

Just as God promised to bring the Israelites into a land that was good, a reflection of the Garden of Eden, a place where they can enjoy rest with God, God in Christ Jesus provides us a resting place in himself.

[23 : 54] In Christ Jesus, we get to enjoy all the blessings of God's people, because unlike us and unlike the Israelites, Jesus was entirely obedient.

He was perfect. And so in being united to him, united to his righteous life, it has now been credited to us.

We no longer need to fear being condemned for our own sin, for Christ has dealt with that on the cross. We no longer need to worry if we have lived a good enough life, because Christ has lived the life that was required from us.

And even in a world full of turmoil, full of war and famines, pain and suffering, distress and uncertainty, things in your life that you might be struggling with, for all of us who believe, who trust in Jesus, even though all that might be going on, we can enjoy rest.

Rest with God, who has given us hope and certainty for our future in Christ. And so it is in Jesus, the word that became flesh, that we can be strong and courageous and continue to walk with God, following him.

[25 : 23] So, who will you serve? For Israel, Joshua called them to a choice, to make a choice, a serious one, a serious commitment to the service of one God.

And I think for us, it's a little bit different, a tiny bit different. For us, this choice is not just a once-off choice we need to make. It's a choice that we need to make daily.

Will we daily choose to serve and follow Jesus, to daily call him Lord and Saviour, to daily repent of our sins and turn back to him, to daily choose him and above all else, to daily remember what he's done for us and obey his commands to serve him and one another.

We do this not in fear of judgment, but knowing Christ has paid for our sin and made us to enjoy rest with God now. So, be strong.

Be courageous. Let's pray.