

Joshua: God's Conquest, I

How do we go about answering questions that arise from our study of texts? We talked in the last session about tools for doing this, especially a biblical concordance and dictionary. We want to reflect on and explore answers to our questions using the tools that are available.

Looking at Joshua 1:1-2, why is it that the Lord says to Joshua, "Moses my servant is dead." It is not likely to have been necessary to alert Joshua of this happening, since Joshua would have known. What background would we be able to discover that might enlighten us as to the significance of this? Why is Moses' death significant? What had been said about the death of Moses? The Lord's reference to the death of Moses ties us back to the end of Deuteronomy. What was the relationship of the death of Moses and the Promised Land? Moses was not to enter the Promised Land. There are a number of references to this, the first of which is Numbers 22:12, also Deuteronomy 1:37-38 and 3:23-27, and about seven others. The death of Moses and the fact that he is not to enter the Promised Land because he had not honored God before the people is significant because the time is not right until he dies. Once he dies God says, "The time is right. Now is the time to move." Prior to Moses' death they had been waiting and being prepared to enter the Promised Land. That, I think, is the reason God mentions the death of Moses. He is not trying to give Joshua information he did not have, but He is telling Joshua, "Now is the time to move." That phrase, "Moses my servant is dead," invokes all this background.

Another question arises from these two verses: what is the significance of Moses being called the servant of the Lord? To answer that question you could look up the phrase, "servant of the LORD," in a Bible dictionary, some of which might have an entry for that. You could also do a computer search of this phrase using Bible software such as Accordance, if you have that available to you. Doing a search of this phrase in a concordance, we see that the first time Moses was called the servant of the Lord was when he died. The subsequent references to Moses as the servant of the Lord are in Joshua. At the end of the book of Joshua, Joshua is called the servant of the Lord and he is referred to by that title also in Chronicles. It seems that this is a commendation that Moses received when his life's work was done and that Joshua receives when his life's work was done. Moses, Joshua, David, and a few unspecified people, as well as the Messiah, are referred to in the Old Testament as "the servant of the LORD." Looking in a concordance you can very quickly get an idea of where this phrase is used. The search on this phrase confirms that this is a title that one receives when one's life work is done.

Another question from this text is who is Joshua? You could begin to answer that question by looking up "Joshua" in a concordance or Bible dictionary. In doing this search you will discover that Joshua had another name, an earlier name—Hoshea (Numbers 13:8). Moses changed his name to Joshua, which means "The LORD [Yahweh] saves." We think Hoshea means something like "salvation," but Moses wanted to make it more specific: "The LORD saves." Maybe Moses knew this would be significant, that Joshua would need to recall who saves, as he is given a very heavy responsibility.

We might also ask what it means that Joshua was Moses' aide. You will find many references to Joshua serving as Moses' aide if you look for verses that have Moses and Joshua in the same verse. Looking at these verses we can begin to see what Joshua experienced. His life included the Exodus, one of the few of the generation of the Exodus that was spared in the wilderness. He had also been involved in military leadership, specifically in the battle against the Amalekites (Exodus 17). Joshua had knowledge of the land into which he is now supposed to bring the people, because he was one of the 12 spies who entered the land in Numbers 13 and 14. We discover that Joshua was the closest person to Moses, often with

him even on Mount Sinai or in the tent of meeting. It says that he was waiting for Moses when he would come back from an encounter with God. We see in so many different ways that God has been uniquely preparing Joshua for the task to which He now calls him. Thus we see that it is important to know that Moses is dead; it is time for new leadership, it is time to enter the land. It is important to know that Joshua had been Moses' aide. He had been learning from Moses, and he had experienced these various things we listed. God has prepared him.

In Joshua 1:2 God begins to use the verb that recurs many times in chapter 1: "give." In 1:2-3 He says, "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." If we were to speak in theological terms, we begin to see a little of God's sovereignty reflected in the use of this verb. God is going to give the land. But we also get a hint of human responsibility because God does not say, "Here is the deed to the land, now go put it in a safe place." Rather He says, "I will give you every place where you set your foot." In other words, "As you go, I will give." The verb "give" is repeated many times in this chapter.

In 1:5 we get the essence of Joshua's charge. This is a nicely structured section, so I would like to look at it in a little more detail. We will look at this part of Joshua's charge because I think it had something important to say to him—and something important to say to us. In 1:5-9 there are some phrases that are repeated: "Be strong and courageous," and "I will be with." "I will be with you" is in verse 5: "As I was with Moses, so shall I be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you." That is paralleled in verse 9: "Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go." This promise of divine accompaniment frames this section. "The LORD will be with [...] the LORD will be with you." This provides the frame for the charge to Joshua. This charge involves a threefold repetition of the command, "Be strong and courageous." Is there any variation in those repetitions? When we see repeated matter we look for variation to see if that might be important. The Lord says, "Be strong and courageous" in 1:6, then "Be very strong and courageous" in 1:7. And then the Lord says again "Be strong and courageous" in 1:9.

What is Joshua being charged to do? Why does God give him three times this charge to be strong and courageous? He is being asked to lead the people into the Promised Land. He needs to be strong and courageous for this task being given to him (1:6). Why does he need to be strong and very courageous (1:7)? The rest of the verse goes on to say, "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." The law is the Torah. The Torah means more than just the legal portion, but also the instructions of God. Joshua needs to be very courageous to obey the instruction, to obey it completely. It takes a certain kind of courage to even accept a responsibility or a task. Often it takes even greater courage to complete that task God's way, according to His rules, to not bend the rules or do it your way but to pay careful attention to the way God says this task should be completed. We will see in the book of Joshua that at a point in his life Joshua falters a little in following the Torah, God's instruction. When was that? In his dealings with the Gibeonites. He did not lead the people in consulting the Lord concerning them, and so he was fooled by them. He did not seek the Lord's instructions on that matter, and it ran them into disaster. That is the way the Christian life is. Whatever courage it might take to get started and to accept the task, we need even more courage to do it God's way, to continue to be faithful to His instructions. Joshua also needed to be strong and courageous to face the terror (1:9). There are some terrifying aspects to walking by faith and being a Christian. It is a great assurance to know God, to know that He oversees our circumstances and that we are in His hands. That does not mean that what we face in life is easier than what others face, but it does mean that He faces those things with us. The Christian faith is a help in life, but it is certainly not a crutch, as some would describe it. There are some terrifying aspects to the Christian walk in general, and to Christian leadership in particular. Now, if you have been

terrorizing those in church leadership over you, you need to change your ways and be more supportive. So Joshua is charged to be courageous for these reasons: he needs to accept the task, he needs to be ready for the discouragement that will come. The Lord says, “Do not be discouraged”—why? Because “the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go.”

Let me go back and comment on a part of this passage that could easily be misunderstood. In 1:7-8 the Lord says, “Do not turn from [the law] 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.” That may sound like, “If you get right with God then will get right in your life—you will suddenly become wealthy and successful.” I remember being at summer camp as a teenager. One time a man taught from this text that if we would be careful to read and obey the Bible, that would guarantee our greater success in school. It may be that if we spend time in Scripture and prayer every day and inculcate that discipline in our lives, that may help us succeed in school. But that is not what is being promised here. What is being promised here is a different kind of success. The success that is promised here is success as God defines it, that is, fulfilling your mission. This is the success of getting where you are supposed to be going, where God is sending you, and getting there God’s way. This success has nothing to do with your physical prosperity, wealth, or well-being.

It may be that God has suffering in store for you. What servant of God was more successful than any servant of God who ever lived? Our Lord Jesus. Jesus is God and human, and He was more successful in following God than any person who has ever lived. How well did He prosper? In terms of his health and wealth, he did not prosper—he died the death of a common thief on a cross. But He perfectly fulfilled that for which He was sent. He was able to say, “It is finished.” That is success. That is what we need to prepare ourselves for, whether we are Christian followers or Christian leaders. Whoever we are, we are given this sort of charge. God is with us, so we must be strong and courageous. And we can rest assured that as we follow His lead, as we read His Word and obey His instruction, we will succeed and prosper—but as He defines success and prosperity. It may be success and prosperity through great difficulty. Jeremiah the prophet spent much of his ministry at the bottom of a well. And yet he succeeded. God told him in advance that no one would believe what he had to say. And yet he succeeded because he obeyed. In our own lives, as we think about where we are and the struggles we face, we may not be able to fix the circumstances. But we can begin to experience success right now—success as God defines it. We will begin to experience success as we turn and really begin to follow Him, saying, “God, I will follow you throughout this circumstance, whatever it brings.”