

THE GRAND ESCAPE

NO. 13. Big Boots to Fill.

Joshua was at least 60 years old. As a youth he had endured slavery in Egypt. At 20, old enough to be a soldier, he had fled with his family and the rest of Israel across the Red Sea, experienced the miraculous provision of manna and water in the desert and then led an equally miraculous military victory over the Amalekites. By the time the nation had come to Mount Sinai, 3 months into their journey, Joshua's courage, faithfulness and strong faith in God had earned him the unique privilege of becoming personal aide to Moses, a situation he fulfilled with honour for the next 40 years. In being a faithful servant Joshua was being trained to be an effective leader: no wonder that God commissioned him, as in Deuteronomy 31:14, to succeed Moses as leader of Israel.

Of course Moses, having reached the age of wisdom at 120, possibly still saw his trusty servant as a callow youth, needing the admonishment in Deuteronomy 31:7, 8 "Be strong and courageous, for you must go with this people into the land that the Lord swore to their forefathers ...The Lord himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged."

But now Moses was gone and as we turn to the book of Joshua chapter 1, we get the feeling that Joshua could be quaking at the thought of the shoes he had to fill. So God personally encouraged his servant in the first 9 wonderful verses. Twice He said, "As I was with Moses, so I will be with you;" 3 times He said "Be strong and courageous" and to add emphasis, "Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go." To Joshua God outlined the extent of the territory that would be conquered - in line with His promise to Abraham over 1,000 years before! - from the Euphrates River in the north, across to the Mediterranean Sea and south to the desert regions – a promise that was fulfilled in the days of David and Solomon. "Be careful to obey all the law," said God, "that you may be successful wherever you go. Have not I commanded you?" And Joshua, being Joshua, obeyed.

It is never easy for a leader to give up power, and it is never easy for a lieutenant to take on the role of a renowned captain. It is vital in Christian leadership that grace and wisdom be sought from God alone for retiring leaders and their successors. It is vital too that the rank and file accept the change with grace and encouragement. And God's own grace is shown in chapter 3:7 where He said to Joshua, "Today I will begin to exalt you in the eyes of all Israel, so they may know that I am with you as I was with Moses."

At this time in history the superpowers of the ancient Near East were relatively weak. Neither Babylon nor Egypt could maintain a military presence in Canaan and the Assyrians did not send their armies until centuries later. Smaller nations east of the Jordan had not been able to stop the passage of the Israelites, and in Deuteronomy chapters 2 and 3 we see Israel's complete defeat of 2 Amorite kings, Sihon of Heshbon and Og of Bashan, where Israel was able to take over even fortified cities and acquire the plunder for themselves. Moses apportioned the conquered land to the tribes of Gad, Reuben and half of Manasseh. These victories were a God-given encouragement to the nation as it faced the pending struggle to conquer all of

Canaan. Bible archaeologists date this period as the Late Bronze Age (1550-1200 B.C.) and today many artifacts indicate the richness of the Canaanite material culture.

Without delay Joshua ordered the officers to go through the camp and prepare the people to cross the Jordan “and take possession of the land the Lord your God is giving you for your own.” (1: 11) The tribes of Reuben, Gad and half of Manasseh had been given possession of land for themselves on the eastern side of the Jordan River and now Joshua reminded them that they must cross the river to help their brother tribes gain land for themselves on the western side. In verses 16-18 these tribes pledged loyalty to Joshua –another great encouragement from God!

As a good strategist Joshua sent out 2 spies into the land around the city of Jericho and chapter 2 gives us a glimpse of the fear that had overtaken the inhabitants of Canaan at the advance of this nation that apparently had God on its side. Yet over against this is set the faith of one Canaanite woman who decided to do something about it. In verse 1 the spies hid in the house of Rahab, a prostitute (or possibly an innkeeper,) who told them in verses 9-11 that miracles such as the drying up of the Red Sea had “melted our hearts and everyone’s courage failed because of you,” yet ending in the confession that “the Lord your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below.” Putting her faith into action she hid the spies under stalks of flax on the roof when agents of the king of Jericho came looking for them, and as a reward she asked that her parents and family be saved from the destruction that was soon to fall on the city. The spies agreed that she gather all her family into her house conveniently situated on the city wall and hang a red cord from the window so that the Israelite soldiers would recognize it and not destroy it along with the rest. Then they returned to Joshua with a glowing report, in verse 24, “The Lord has surely given the whole land into our hands; all the people are melting in fear because of us.”

Some people are uneasy about the God of the Old Testament who ordered His people to subdue nation after nation with wholesale slaughter in order to gain territory for themselves. But that is not the full story. For centuries God had endured the extreme wickedness of those nations and now it was His time to displace them so that a part of His created land would be ruled by a people faithful to Him, who would be a witness to His love and grace to the rest of the world. In destroying the Canaanite people God was destroying the Canaanite religion.

The crossing of the Jordan by the whole Israelite nation, recorded in chapter 3, is a drama second only to the crossing of the Red Sea. In the early morning Joshua led them all from Shittim to the banks of the river where they camped for 3 days, under orders to consecrate themselves “for tomorrow the Lord will do amazing things among you” (verse 5) and to follow the lead of the priests carrying the ark of the covenant - a symbol of God's presence and His claim to the land. To the priests he ordered that when they reached the bank they should go straight ahead and walk right into the river. Then he turned to the whole nation with this assurance in verse 13, “As soon as the priests who carry the ark of the Lord – the Lord of all the earth – set foot in the Jordan, its waters flowing downstream will be cut off and stand up in a heap.”

Acting in great faith the priests obeyed Joshua, and as soon as their feet touched the water’s edge, the water from upstream stopped flowing and piled up in a heap a great distance away at a town called Adam, while the water flowing downstream was completely cut off. Thus the priests were able to stand in the middle of the river on dry ground while the whole nation crossed over drier ground. It is possible that God used a naturally occurring means such as a landslide to dam up the river for several hours (which has happened in recent times) yet verse 15 emphasises the miraculous aspect of the phenomenon – “Now the Jordan is at flood stage all during harvest”

(because of the spring rains and the melting of snow on Mount Hermon), "yet ... the water stopped flowing" until the whole nation had made the crossing and the priests had come up out of the river still carrying the ark. One man from each tribe was chosen to collect a stone from the river bed where the priest had been standing and at their campsite of Gilgal Joshua erected them into a monument of thanksgiving and a reminder to pass on to their children that it was God Who worked the miracle for them. It is significant that chapter 5:1 tells how the hearts of the Amorite kings melted when they heard "how *the Lord* had dried up the Jordan before the Israelites until we had crossed over."

Notice that it was God Who dried up the river, but it was the priests who actually stepped off the bank! Their faith that God would perform the miracle had to be coupled with action. Don't ever expect God to do for you what you can just as easily do for yourself!

The rest of chapter 5 tells of the re-institution of 2 important rituals which had been neglected during the 40 years of wilderness wanderings. All the males must be circumcised and here is an interesting fact, that though metal knives were available, God commanded that flint knives be used. Modern demonstrations have proved that flint makes a more efficient surgical tool than metal. Having been circumcised the men were then qualified to partake of the Passover; this had also been neglected and Israel needed to be reminded of these 2 institutions which set her apart as God's chosen people. And to emphasise God's ever-perfect timing, the day after the Passover the people were able to eat food from the land – bread and roasted grain. The very next day, after 40 years of faithful supply, the manna stopped!

Verses 13-15 tell of Joshua's encounter with a man standing in front of him with a drawn sword. Joshua naturally wanted to know whose side he was on but he was quickly put in his place. This messenger had come from God as commander of the army of the Lord; God was not fighting on Israel's side – it was Israel's place to fight on God's side! In carrying out God's will for the world, Israel would reap the benefit of gaining nationhood and a prosperous homeland. Joshua immediately realised the significance of the occasion and bowed in reverence with the words, "What message does my Lord have for his servant?" As an echo of Moses' encounter with God so many years before, Joshua was told to take off his shoes for he was standing on holy ground.

In response to his respect and obedience, the Lord gave Joshua in chapter 6 explicit instructions for the conquest of Jericho, beginning with the amazing encouragement in verse 2 that He had already delivered Jericho into their hands. Yet the method of assault on the city must have tested Joshua's faith to the limit; no swords, no spears, no battle cry – just a silent march around the city walls once a day for 6 days to the accompaniment of 7 trumpets blown by 7 priests, then 7 times on the 7th day, a final trumpet blast from the priests and at last a great shout from the people. This would initiate their victory!

To carry out this strategy must have taken a tremendous amount of faith from Joshua. He must also have had a lot of faith in his men; without being able to explain the reason to them, he had to rely on their silence as they marched around the walls, their self-control in not responding to the insults that would have come from watchers on the wall, and their patience as for 6 long days, nothing happened. It says a lot for their faith in their leader, and their faith in God, that they carried out Joshua's orders meticulously, not one breaking ranks to spoil the unnerving effect this seemingly absurd ritual would have on their enemy. The greatest preacher, the most learned teacher, the gifted leader, cannot succeed to the full without the

support of the rank and file dependent on them. God has so ordained that in the family of Christ we need each other and each one of us is of equal importance to His work.

By the vital 7th day, the tension must have risen to unbearable heights. We don't know the total number of soldiers, but we know from Joshua 4:13 that from Reuben, Gad and half of Manasseh alone, 40,000 men, armed for battle, crossed the Jordan. Panic was suddenly brought to a head by a loud call to battle from the trumpet and a great shout from all the people. The wall collapsed all around and the Israelites were able to march straight in and claim the city, committing it, as God had commanded, to total destruction.

There was one exception however. In verse 22 Joshua commanded the spies to go to Rahab's house (which miraculously had not collapsed and had the scarlet cord hanging from the window as arranged) and rescue her and all her family, in fulfilment of their promise to her. The young men brought out the entire family and took them to a place of safety outside the camp before the whole city was set on a cleansing fire. Plunder that survived the burning - silver, gold, bronze and iron - was later consecrated to the treasury of the Lord's house.

This is the other side of the story of the God seen as a warmonger. His miraculous preservation of the nation of Israel over the past 40 years was given as a sign of His greatness and power, available to all who would believe and follow Him as Israel did. Sadly no other nation took up the offer to escape destruction –none but the notable individual, Rahab. Alone she chose to place her faith in God above her duty to her own country, demonstrated in her protection of the spies and a concern for her parents and all her loved ones. And God honoured that faith. Verse 25 tells us that the whole family made their home among the Israelites and they must have found good acceptance, as Rahab married into a family of good standing and is described in Matthew 1:5 as the mother of Boaz, a man of importance in the Israelite community. But most importantly, Boaz was the great-grandfather of David, the forerunner of Jesus Christ, and so to Rahab, a Gentile, goes the honour of being in the genealogy of the Messiah! Our God of the Old Testament was gracious!