

Lesson 2

A New Leader Emerges

Joshua 1

Introduction

As the book of Joshua opens, a new generation has come to the scene and now faces fresh and daunting challenges under a new leader. Joshua and Israel stand on the east side of the Jordan ready to cross over and invade the west side. Joshua 1 contains three sets of speeches. The chapter is dominated by the themes of faithful leadership, receiving the promised land, and obedience to God. While drawing off the books of Law, these values also signal a watershed moment opening a new chapter in the life of Israel.

Joshua 1 introduces key questions: What will this leadership look like? What challenges await? The answers are found in each section of the chapter:

1. 1.1-9: God commissions Joshua to lead Israel into the land.
2. 1.10-15: Joshua then charges the people to prepare for conquest, obeying God's law.
3. 1.16-18: The people pledge obedience to Joshua and God.

If one were to seek to summarize chapter 1 in one word the word *performance* comes to mind. God, Joshua, and the people simply declare their directives. Each have responsibilities in which to follow through. The mood is urgent as God issues commands to the faithful. Success only comes considering obedience to God's directives. Leadership, obedience to covenant, and receiving God's promises take center stage as key values for this new generation who finds itself on the brink of a momentous next phase.

1.1-9: God Commissions Joshua

Joshua begins by connecting himself with the story line left off in Deuteronomy 34. Moses has died and Joshua, who is around the age of 90, has been commissioned to be his replacement.⁶ No matter that he had spent most of his life preparing for this moment, there still would have been a great deal of apprehension to deal with as he thought about the weight of succeeding Moses, *the servant of God*. Now, *he* was going to stand in Moses' place and serve as God's spokesman and leader. This is one of the underlying messages of the chapter, as continuity of leadership is assured. God speaks to Joshua first, seeking to build him up and encourage him.

1.2-5: Assurance and Promises

It has been suggested that these verses serve as a neat outline of what is to come in the rest of the book.⁷ Verse 2 corresponds to 1.1-5.12 and the crossing of the Jordan. Verse 3 outlines the conquest, 5.13-12.25. Verse 4 looks forward to the distribution of the land in 13.1-22.34. And finally, *all the days* of Joshua's life points to the last two chapters of the book.

Now you and all the people prepare to cross over the Jordan to the land I am giving the Israelites. Due to topography, the command of verse 2 would have been formidable. There were mountains on both sides, and the river itself runs through a deep trough. At the time of the crossing, as indicated in 3.15, the river was at flood stage. None of this mattered. God instructs Joshua to lead. As He does so, notice how he encourages, not only Joshua, but the entire nation:

- The land was a gift, 1.2b, while simultaneously something to be claimed and allotted.
- They were encouraged to take possession of *all* the land of promise, *where the sole of your foot treads*, 1.3.
- God describes the boundaries of the land, at their widest extent. It would be only during the time under David and Solomon that Israel would actually possess the entirety of the land, 1.4. The ancient Hittites would have been seen as the local superpower. God promises they would have their land dispossessed.
- Now, focusing again specifically on Joshua, God assures the new leader that *no one will be able to stand against you as long as you live. I will be with you just as I was with Moses. I will not leave you or abandon you*, 1.5. This is a restatement of the promises given in Deuteronomy 7.24 and 11.25.

1.6-9: A Call to Courage

All God promised was *conditional*. The words *be strong and courageous* are repeated three times.⁸ It describes the attitude he needed to possess. First, he needed total confidence *in God's ability* to fulfill the promises He made. He also had to believe that *he was the one* to lead the people at this time. Here God is emphasizing His *presence* with Joshua.

Success was conditioned upon Joshua making his first concern about obedience to the law, 1.7-8. One could interpret "success" as thriving in the life that God has orchestrated, think of the application of Psalm 1. In this context, such thriving would make itself known in a military sense, as Israel lays claim to and prospers in the land bestowed by God. Joshua would need to demonstrate the same fearless obedience to God's commands as Moses had written in the Law regarding the conquest of Canaan. He was bound to be diligent in faithfully following *all* that God had declared in His word. His obedience was a demonstration of trust, *believing* that God's instructions contained the path to victory.

Understanding verse 9 is essential. Joshua has been chosen by God for this mission and he *must* follow through. And for that, he is assured personally that *the Lord your God is with you wherever you go*, 1.9b. The last line of the charge, "wherever you go," echoes the conclusion of verse 7 and the promise of success through obedience. This affirms that Joshua will not stand alone in striving to obey God's law. Rather, both obedience and prosperity will be experienced in the presence of the Lord who provided the law and made the promises. Joshua will not prosper merely by following God's commands; his success will come because the Lord himself will be with Joshua, empowering him to obey. The repetition of "wherever you go" binds the divine promise to Joshua's leadership - God promises His presence everywhere Joshua leads the people. Thus, obedience and victory are assured, not based on human effort alone but on the Lord's faithful support. He who gives the law also supplies the grace to live according to it through his abiding presence with Joshua.

So, Joshua 1.1-9 sets the stage for the entire book, conveying promises and directives for both Joshua and all Israel. Its connection with Deuteronomy suggests what was begun previously will now be brought to fruition. These opening verses essentially repeat God's earlier instructions to Moses, now entrusting them to Joshua as leader in Moses' place.

Beyond spiritual guidance, the passage serves an important political function carried through the first chapters – i.e., establishing Joshua as God-ordained successor to Moses' authority. Times of leadership transition often generate instability and threats to a nation's security. Accordingly, repeated texts throughout Joshua 1 legitimize Joshua's position to ensure Moses' death did not spark power struggles as in the wilderness. Instead, the divine promises and instructions originally given to Moses are now Joshua's as well, demonstrating his role over Israel's political, military, and religious affairs even *before* crossing the Jordan River. This section introduces both continuity and change as a new generation prepares to take the land under new God-appointed leadership.

1.10-15: Joshua Addresses the People

1.10-11: To the Tribal Leaders

Joshua wastes no time in moving forward. First, he addresses the leading offices of the tribes. These leaders in turn were to pass these instructions along to everyone among them. They were to gather all the necessary supplies they would need until they reached the new land. There was no time for delay. In three days, the nation would cross the Jordan and begin realizing their new inheritance.

1.12-15: To Reuben, Gad, and Half of Manasseh

These tribes were already beginning to settle on the east side of the Jordan. This was part of their inheritance, as given by Moses, Numbers 32.16-32. By receiving this before the rest of the nation, these tribes agreed to send their fighting men to be the first to cross the river and help their fellow citizens conquer the land. Now the time has come for them to follow through. Would they respond in the affirmative? Would they be willing to leave their families behind? Did they trust that when the mission was completed that they would be able to return home?

1.16-18: The People Respond

The leaders immediately pledged their support. *All you have commanded, we will do.* Wherever Joshua would send them, they would go. They also gave their complete allegiance to Joshua, understanding he is the one chosen by God to lead. If anyone determined to disobey his commands, the death penalty came into play. This is the principle established by the Law in Deuteronomy 17.12.

Throughout the chapter, we see faith in action. They trusted in the hope that God would be with Joshua just like he had with Moses. For them, they see and clearly understand that victory is only possible via the help and assistance of God. All those in the eastern tribes prayed for Joshua's strength and courage, knowing that minus his strong leadership the entire mission would fail.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the opening chapter of the book of Joshua is a testament to the enduring themes of leadership, divine promise, and steadfast obedience. As Joshua takes over leadership responsibilities from Moses, Scripture emphasizes that God's presence and His assurances are unchanging, even amidst the uncertainty of new challenges and transitions. The call to courage, the commitment to God's law, and the unity of the Israelites in their pledge to follow Joshua capture the essence of their faith and determination. The book of Joshua thus begins with a powerful message of continuity, as a new generation rises to claim the promises of God. It is a chapter that not only recounts the preparation for a significant military campaign but also reinforces the spiritual and communal bonds that are crucial for Israel's success.

As we reflect on Joshua 1, we're reminded that true success in our endeavors mirrors the Israelites' experience—it is rooted in listening to God's guidance, mustering courage, and walking in obedience. We must come to see our own lives in light of God's overarching plan for our life, encouraging us to trust in His promises and step forward with confidence, knowing that He is with us in every chapter of life. The legacy of Joshua serves as an enduring inspiration, calling us to faithful leadership and reminding us that God's presence is the cornerstone of our strength and the assurance of our triumph.

For Class Interaction and Discussion

Lesson Outline:

1. Introduction to a New Era:
 - Transition from Moses to Joshua's leadership.
 - The importance of continuity and God's unchanging promises.
2. God Commissions Joshua (1:1-9):
 - Joshua's charge to lead.
 - The assurance and promises from God.
 - The call to courage and obedience.
3. Joshua Addresses the People (1:10-15):
 - Instructions to the tribal leaders.
 - Commitments of the eastern tribes.
 - Preparation for crossing the Jordan.
4. The People Respond (1:16-18):
 - The pledge of obedience to Joshua.
 - The importance of unity and collective action.
 - The faith in God's presence and promises.

Thought Questions for Discussion

1. What do you think were Joshua's greatest concerns about succeeding Moses?
2. How does God provide encouragement and assurance to Joshua and the Israelites?
3. What does the repeated command to "be strong and courageous" tell us about the challenges ahead?
4. How is success defined in Joshua 1, and how does it relate to obedience?
5. In what ways can we apply the principles of Joshua 1 to our own life?

6. Why was the preparation period crucial for the Israelites before crossing the Jordan?
7. Discuss the significance of the eastern tribes' commitment to help their fellow Israelites.
8. How does the people's response to Joshua's leadership reflect their faith?
9. What can we learn about God's character from His interactions with Joshua?
10. How can we, as a community, demonstrate the unity and commitment shown by the Israelites?

Group Activities:

Mapping the Journey: Create a map of the Israelite camp and the crossing of the Jordan, adding notes about the key events of Joshua 1.

Courageous Commitments: Divide into groups and have each member write down a personal challenge and a "be strong and courageous" pledge for how they will face it, reflecting on Joshua's call to courage.

Group Discussion: Divide into groups to discuss the application of "success" as defined in Joshua 1 in personal, professional, and spiritual areas of life.

Final Encouraging Word:

As we close our study of Joshua 1, let's take to heart the powerful message of trust and obedience laid out before us. We've seen a people ready to step into the promises of God, led by a man who was both humbled and emboldened by the tasks ahead. May we be inspired by Joshua's example to lead with faith, to act with courage, and to follow with unwavering commitment to God's Word. Remember, no matter what 'Jordans' we may face, we have the assurance that God is with us, guiding us to step into the fullness of His plans for our lives. Let's move forward with confidence, knowing that the same God who was with Joshua and the Israelites is with us today, empowering us for every challenge we face today.

⁶ Joshua was designated as Moses' successor in Numbers 27.15-23; Deuteronomy 3.21-22; 31.1-8.

⁷ Hess, p. 74.

⁸ The three-time repetition of *be strong and courageous* is also seen in Deuteronomy 31.6-7, 23.