

Three Things God Gives to Those Who Survive

Joshua 1:1–9

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Archaeological Moment: Sennacherib's Throne Room and the Siege of Jerusalem

Before we open Joshua tonight, I want to share something from the ancient world that has been on my mind — a piece of Assyrian art that illuminates, in a striking way, what it means for a people to survive the loss of a leader and press forward anyway.

In the British Museum, among the carved stone reliefs recovered from the ruins of Nineveh, there is a slab known as Slab 28 from Sennacherib's Throne Room. It depicts the Assyrian siege and capture of Lachish in 701 BC — one of the most detailed military records surviving from the ancient Near East. Sennacherib had this victory carved into the walls of his palace so that every visitor would see it. The Assyrians have surrounded the city. The siege ramps are being driven against the walls. Prisoners are being led away. The king sits on his throne, receiving tribute from the conquered.

What the relief does not show is Jerusalem. Sennacherib attacked Lachish. He besieged Jerusalem. He sent a messenger to mock Hezekiah and taunt the people of God. He boasted, in his own annals, that he had shut Hezekiah up “like a bird in a cage.” But Jerusalem did not fall. The Assyrian army withdrew. Sennacherib went home and eventually died by the sword of his own sons in the house of his god.

The relief on the wall of his throne room is a monument to what *he* accomplished. But the city of God survived. Not because of Hezekiah's strength, but because God's word through Isaiah proved true. What Sennacherib built in stone to last forever is now a museum exhibit. Jerusalem is still a city.

I mention this tonight because we are going to study a passage about surviving the death of a great leader — and about what God gives to the people who are left standing when that leader is gone. Slab 28 is a reminder that empires do not have the final word. God does.

The Weight of Moses' Death

Today was the funeral for Carl Pemberton. Some of you were there. Some of you knew Carl well, and some of you may not have known him long. Carl served this church faithfully — in Awana, on the Board of Trustees, with Radio Bible Class, and as a greeter at our door. He was the kind of person whose presence you noticed most clearly after it was gone.

And this is one more death that has been hard to absorb. In the past twelve months, we have lost Carl Pemberton, Jerry Bridges, Virginia Benson, Jim Spurlock, Addie Gray, Anita Jones, Tim Eastman, Charles Power, Pat Meredith, Peggy Saunders, Jean Ann Maynard, Joe Collins, John Hovey, Darrell Walden, Lois Merritt, James Daniel, and Sally Flanders. Many of these were leaders — key, critical people in the life of this congregation. We are still recovering. It has been too much.

Something I have always noticed in obituaries is the section that describes surviving family. You hear it read at funerals — *preceding her in death were* so-and-so, and then, *survivors include*. That phrase always stops me. *Survivors include*. As though there were a disaster, and only a few people made it through.

I want to use that word tonight. *Survivors*. Because the Bible knows something about what it means to be the ones who are left — the ones who must keep going after a great leader is gone. And I want to show you three things that God gives to those who survive.

The book of Joshua opens with exactly this situation. Notice how it begins:

| “After the death of Moses the servant of the LORD...”

That is where this story starts. Not with triumph, not with momentum — with death. With the loss of the most significant leader Israel had ever known.

Do you think that death created a crisis for the people of Israel? Do you think it was easy?

It is difficult for us to fully appreciate everything Moses represented to them. Moses was the man through whom God led a nation out of Egypt with signs and wonders. He stretched out his hand over the Red Sea and God divided the waters. He met with God at Sinai. He received the covenant law and taught it to the people. He led an entire nation through forty years in the wilderness. He interceded for Israel when the people sinned. He spoke with God, the text says, as a man speaks with his friend. Through his leadership, God formed a collection of former slaves into a covenant people.

And now Moses was dead — at the very moment Israel stood on the eastern bank of the Jordan, preparing to enter the Promised Land.

Ahead of them were fortified cities, organized kingdoms, trained armies, chariots, and the descendants of Anak — the very people the earlier spies had described as giants. The Jordan itself stood between Israel and the land, and at that time of year it was overflowing its banks.

The people must have had questions. Who will lead us now? How will we know where to go? How will we face what is waiting on the other side? Will the promises God made through Moses still hold now that Moses is gone?

Joshua must have felt the weight of those questions more than anyone. He was being asked to follow the greatest leader Israel had ever known. Read how Deuteronomy ends — that is Moses' funeral, the final word spoken over him:

“And there has not arisen a prophet since in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face, none like him for all the signs and the wonders that the LORD sent him to do in the land of Egypt.” (Deuteronomy 34:10–11)

Now, Joshua: your turn.

Was Joshua ready? He probably did not feel ready. But notice what the text says about him even here — God spoke to “Joshua the son of Nun, Moses' assistant.” Being Moses' assistant meant Joshua had been trained. God had been preparing him for years. He had led Israel in battle against Amalek. He had accompanied Moses on the mountain. He had remained near the tent of meeting. He had entered Canaan as one of the twelve spies and, with Caleb, trusted God when the others turned back in fear. He had served faithfully, for years, in the shadow of another man's greatness. And before Moses died, Joshua had been publicly commissioned before the whole assembly.

Joshua was suddenly responsible. But he had not been suddenly prepared. God had formed him through years of service, obedience, courage, and faith.

That is often how God works. We arrive at a moment that feels sudden to us, and only then do we begin to see that God had been preparing us for it over many years.

But Joshua's confidence could not finally rest in his preparation. His experience was not sufficient for what lay ahead. This is why, when Moses dies, God gives to Joshua — and to all the people — three gifts. Three things God gives to those who survive.

1. God's Promises Go Before Them

“Moses my servant is dead. Now therefore arise, go over this Jordan, you and all this people, into the land that I am giving to them, to the people of Israel. Every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon I have given to you, just as I promised to Moses.” (Joshua 1:2–3)

Notice carefully how God speaks here. Before Joshua takes a single step across the Jordan, God says, *I am giving the land to them*. And then he speaks of it as something already settled: *I have given it to you*. Present and past. The giving is already underway. The promise is already in force.

The death of Moses had not canceled the promise of God. Moses was gone, but God's covenant remained. The leader had changed; the Lord had not changed.

This is a critical truth for the people of God. God uses human leaders. He calls particular people, equips them, and works through them in ways that are real and significant. We should honor those whom God uses. But God's purposes never rest entirely upon any one human being. Every servant of God is temporary; the faithfulness of God is everlasting.

God has not promised each of us a Canaan to conquer, or guaranteed that every undertaking we begin will succeed. But Joshua's God is our God. What God promises, God faithfully fulfills. Our confidence does not rest in seizing whatever promise we would like to claim, but in knowing the promises God has truly given us in Christ: forgiveness of sin, the presence of the Holy Spirit, sufficient grace, resurrection from the dead, and an inheritance that cannot perish, spoil, or fade.

Moses is gone. The promises are not.

2. God's Presence Is With Them

“From the wilderness and this Lebanon as far as the great river, the river Euphrates, all the land of the Hittites to the Great Sea toward the going down of the sun shall be your territory. No man shall be able to stand before you all the days of your life. Just as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will not leave you or forsake you. Be strong and courageous, for you shall cause this people to inherit the land that I swore to their fathers to give them. Only be strong and very courageous...” (Joshua 1:4–7a)

Notice what God does not say. He does not say, “Joshua, you are talented enough. You have the experience. You have everything you need within yourself.” God gives Joshua something far better than confidence in himself: God gives Joshua the assurance of his own presence.

Just as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will not leave you or forsake you.

And this assurance is tied directly to the command to be courageous — which means that biblical courage is not the conviction that we are strong enough to handle whatever comes. Biblical courage is confidence that God is faithful and that he will be with us in whatever he calls us to face. Courage is faithful obedience in the presence of fear, because we trust someone greater than what frightens us.

Three times in this short passage, God tells Joshua to be strong and courageous. Each occurrence carries a particular weight. In verse 6, Joshua needs courage to accept the responsibility of leading the people. In verse 7, he needs courage to obey God’s Word without compromise. In verse 9, he can have courage precisely because God will be with him wherever he goes. The command is held together by the promise. God does not merely say, “Be courageous.” He says, in effect, “Be courageous *because I am with you.*”

This does not mean that nothing painful will happen. Joshua will face battles, opposition, disappointment, sin within the camp, and the long slow burden of difficult leadership. The presence of God does not mean the absence of trouble. It means we never enter our trouble alone.

3. God’s Word Will Guide Them

“Only be strong and very courageous, being careful to do according to all the law that Moses my servant commanded you. Do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, that you may have good success wherever you go. This 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 according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success. Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go.” (Joshua 1:7–9)

Joshua would not lead Israel by copying Moses’ personality, or through instinct, military experience, or whatever seemed to be working at the moment. His life and leadership were to be governed by the Word of God.

People still ask the same questions Israel must have asked standing on the east bank of the Jordan. How can I know where to go? How can I know what is right? How can I understand God's will and purposes? How should I respond to what is in front of me right now?

We might wish God would send us a daily message with a precise schedule and a personalized answer to every decision. But that is not his ordinary way of leading his people. God has given us something deeper than a daily list of individual instructions. He has given us his written Word — through which we come to know his character, his works, his will, his promises, and the kind of people he calls us to become. And he has given us the Holy Spirit, who opens our understanding and applies that Word to our lives.

Scripture does not tell us which car to buy or what to order for dinner. But it forms in us the wisdom, desires, convictions, and character by which faithful decisions can be made. The goal is not merely to find a verse that answers a question. It is to become a person whose entire life is shaped by what God has spoken.

Joshua 1 gives us four closely related actions that describe what a life shaped by Scripture actually looks like.

Know God's Word

Joshua could not obey "all the law" without knowing what it said. The Book of the Law was not to be treated as a sacred object — something holy to possess but unnecessary to read. It was to be heard, learned, remembered, and understood. Later, when Israel entered the land and gathered at Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim, Joshua read the law before the entire assembly: *"There was not a word of all that Moses commanded that Joshua did not read before all the assembly of Israel"* (Joshua 8:35). Joshua was a student of God's Word before he was the leader of God's people.

If we desire to serve God faithfully, we must become people of the Word. This does not mean that everyone must study in precisely the same way. Across two thousand years of Christian history, believers have known Scripture through public worship, private reading, memorization, prayer, teaching, discussion, and meditation. The method may vary, but there is no substitute for sustained, attentive engagement with what God has actually said.

Speak God's Word

"This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth."

That expression suggests more than private reading. God's Word was to remain on Joshua's lips — to be recited, taught, discussed, and used to guide the people. This echoes the great command of Deuteronomy 6:

“Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.” (Deuteronomy 6:4–9)

God’s Word was intended to enter the ordinary conversations of life — in the house, along the road, at the beginning of the day, and at its end.

We find it easy to talk about politics, sports, work, and whatever is in the news. There is nothing necessarily wrong with those subjects. But does Scripture ever make its way into our ordinary conversations? Do we tell one another what God is teaching us? Do we speak his promises to someone who is discouraged? Do we bring his wisdom into the decisions our families are making? Keeping God’s Word on our lips does not require making every conversation forced or unnatural. It means that Scripture has become so much a part of us that it naturally shapes the way we speak about life.

Meditate on God’s Word

“...but you shall meditate on it day and night.”

The Hebrew word translated “meditate” can carry the sense of quietly murmuring or repeating something. Joshua was to recite the Word, turn it over in his mind, ponder its meaning, and consider its application — not once, but constantly.

Biblical meditation is not emptying the mind. It is filling the mind with God’s truth and remaining with that truth long enough for it to begin shaping our thinking. To meditate upon Scripture means to read it slowly; to repeat it; to think about what it reveals concerning God; to wrestle with what is difficult; to memorize what we need to carry with us; to consider where it confronts, corrects, comforts, or directs us; and to ask how it must change the way we live.

It is the difference between walking quickly across a field and stopping to cultivate the soil. Many of us encounter Scripture briefly, but never remain with it long enough for its roots to go deep. To meditate is to carry a passage with you — to turn it over until its truth moves from the page, to the mind, to the heart, and finally into action.

Obey God’s Word

“...so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success.”

Joshua was not to know the Word simply to possess information. He was not to speak it simply so others would consider him learned. He was not to meditate upon it for intellectual satisfaction alone. He was to *do* what God had said.

Most of us would benefit from knowing Scripture better. We could read more carefully, speak about it more naturally, meditate upon it more deeply. But the central issue is often not that we know nothing of what God desires. The central issue is that we do not consistently practice what we already know.

It is possible to admire Scripture without obeying it. It is possible to defend the authority of Scripture in the abstract while resisting its authority in our own relationships, finances, speech, generosity, and forgiveness.

Notice where God places the strongest emphasis in this passage. We might expect “be very courageous” to be connected with the walls of Jericho or the armies of Canaan. Instead, in verse 7, it is connected with obedience to the Word. Joshua needed courage not only to face an enemy on a battlefield, but to remain faithful when compromise seemed easier. Sometimes the greatest courage is not courage in a fight. It is the courage to obey God when disobedience would be more convenient, when compromise would be more popular, or when faithfulness appears unlikely to succeed.

What Does “Success” Mean?

God tells Joshua that if he remains faithful to the Word, he will make his way prosperous and have good success. These words have sometimes been treated as a formula for financial prosperity or personal achievement. But that is not what is being promised here.

Joshua’s calling would not be comfortable. He was about to face warfare, opposition, failure within Israel, and the long burdens of leadership. In this context, prosperity and success mean wisely and faithfully accomplishing the covenant task God had assigned to him. Biblical success is not getting everything we want. It is faithfully becoming who God calls us to be and doing what God gives us to do.

Nor was Joshua earning God’s gift through obedience. Notice the order of the passage carefully. God first says, *I am giving you the land — I have given it to you*. Then he commands Joshua to obey. Grace precedes obedience. Joshua’s faithfulness does not cause God to keep his promise; God’s faithfulness enables Joshua to walk within that promise.

That order matters for us as well. We do not obey Christ in order to make God love us. In Christ, God has already loved us, redeemed us, and made us his own. We obey as a response to grace, not as a means of securing it.

The Greater Joshua

There is one final connection we should not miss. The Hebrew name Joshua and the name Jesus are forms of the same name: *The LORD saves*. Joshua led Israel across the Jordan and into the land — but he could not give God’s people their final rest. The book of Hebrews tells us that a greater rest still remained.

Jesus is the greater Joshua. He leads his people not merely into a territory, but into salvation, reconciliation with God, resurrection life, and the eternal rest of God’s kingdom. And before Jesus sent his disciples into the world, he gave them an assurance remarkably close to the one God gave Joshua at the Jordan:

| “Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:20)

We do not know everything that lies ahead of us. Israel could not see beyond the Jordan. We cannot see beyond the present moment. But we have what we need in order to walk forward faithfully.

God’s promises are certain. God’s presence is with us. God’s Word will guide us.

Moses was gone. The Jordan was ahead. Enemies occupied the land. But God’s promise remained, God’s presence accompanied them, and God’s Word showed them how to walk forward.

Therefore: know God’s Word. Keep God’s Word on your lips. Meditate upon God’s Word. And have the courage to obey it.

| “Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go.”