

As we gather together this morning, we bless our most sovereign God and we praise our most gracious God for the gift of allowing us to worship together again, in the midst of the atmosphere of the turbulent chaos we have been experiencing over the past five months. We are living in days of suffering throughout the whole world. Those of us in North America are experiencing pain from a toxic mix of issues: a deadly pandemic that has infected and affected millions of people, economic fragility, high unemployment rates, stay-at-home orders, racial unrest, anger over police brutality, violent protests, blatant political posturing, countless new restrictions regarding masks, social distance, handwashing, Plexiglas and lots of arrows. It seems even the weather is experiencing intense stress.

These are also challenging times for leaders. In times of duress and difficulty, it is imperative for leaders to rise from the shadows and steer the people into a future of possibility and hope. In our days we have seen that in some of our leaders. But we desperately need to many more to do so. The truth is leadership is not always assigned, rather it is usually clarified in times of trial. Leadership is the confrontation of the major anxiety of our people in our time. These days are perhaps the greatest window opportunity for god-centered leadership to show up, more than we ever we have seen in our lifetime. True leaders know that you will always find opportunity on the back-end of difficulty. This is not exploitative opportunity, as some may attempt, but the opportunity to see sparks of courage, wisdom, innovation, and character take hold and fan into flame, fueled by a crisis and the need for steady and strong men and women to stand against the tide of incoming despair.

We are going through a time drastic change and radical transition. We will not know life as we knew it before. It's at such times we begin to wonder if we will have the strength and unity to bear up under the stresses of the changes and transitions that confront us. It is a such times we need God's leader. It is into that this kind of scenario we find ourselves this morning as we step into the book of Joshua where we read of God's people going through the transition of one direction into another direction – shifting from one purpose (escaping from slavery and wandering) to another purpose (to entering the promised land and claiming it for their own). Moses, the great spiritual leader of the chosen people of Israel, who had led them out of the bondage of slavery in Egypt, who had spoken face to face with God on their behalf, who had delivered the Ten Commandments written by the hand of God, was now gone - and Joshua is about to step into that empty place of leadership. From a human point of view, the transition from Moses to Joshua was momentous; but from the divine point of view, it simply a divine transition of Gods calling. The true and real leader of God's people – God Himself - was at work. He simply would be working through the new leader of His choosing.

As we open this book we find Israel, the people of God, preparing to cross the Jordan River about 1400 years before the birth of Christ, into the land of Canaan which God had promised them. Moses had led them out of Egypt and through a 40-year journey through the desert. In reality they could have gotten to the River Jordan in 12 days. Despite the strong spiritual leadership of Moses, they still wandered for 40 years because of the fallen, sinful inability of the people to follow. The distance between 12 days and 40 years reflected the distance between their hearts and the heart of God. The time between 12 days and 40 years constituted the discipline of God as He prepared them for the days ahead. The promised land was God's gift to the people of Israel, but it would only come through exhausting work and sacrificial warfare. The Lord Jehovah had given them title to the land of milk and honey before them, but they could only possess it by fighting for every last inch of it. It was a time of great challenge for both Joshua and the people. Transition and change were at hand for them; combat would replace wandering, obedience would take the place of resistance, submission was exchanged for opinion, and commitment would replace independence. I'm not giving away any secrets in telling you that these people did ultimately take possession of Canaan. But we will see today, and over the next couple of months, how it was that the chosen people of God claimed and took possession of the promised land in midst of great change and dramatic transition.

Anything in life that is inherently good is worth fighting for and will come at great cost. God has promised each one of us to do something for Him far beyond what we are doing right now. God loves us too much to leave us where we are. God has created us and saved us and chosen us and called us here to fulfill God's plans and God's purposes. *God's purpose* and *God's plan* for our lives is that we would live out our lives for God in a way that makes God preeminent over everything. In Isaiah 43:7 God declared: *"Everyone who is called by my name, whom I formed and made . . . I created for my glory."* 1 Corinthians 10:31 says: *"Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God."* In other words – *God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him!*

God's desire for our lives is that we would live an abundant life, filled to overflowing with Kingdom fruit. And the fruit that God desires for our lives has nothing to do with success or money or position or possessions or family or comfort and happiness. The abundant fruit God desires for our lives is the fruit of joyfully being so satisfied in God that He is glorified in everything we think, say and do. 1 Peter 1:8-9 says: *"Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls."* And the truth is, we cannot bear that kind of fruit by ourselves or through other people, places and things. In John 15:11 Jesus said: *"These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full."*

This is the challenge of being chosen by God. This is the challenge of our day, the same challenge God's people faced 3500 years ago as they stood before the Jordan River ready to cross into the promised land. While the times we live in have changed, the truths and principles of God regarding how we can claim and possess those promises of God have not changed. The only variable in the equation - *is us*. Sir Edmund Hillary, the conqueror of Mount Everest once said: *"It is not the mountain we conquer but ourselves."* What will it take for us as God's people to rise up to the challenge of being chosen by God to enter the land God has promised us, so that we might fully possess the joyful abundance His promises? God's Word tells us how in our text for this morning.

I. First, we see that God's people rise to the challenge of being chosen to live out God's plans and God purposes – when we hear and affirm God's call for our lives. *"After the death of Moses the servant of the Lord, the Lord said to Joshua the son of Nun, Moses' assistant, "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. 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, 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 1:1-9

As Joshua sat waiting expectantly to hear the voice of God near the river, he was not disappointed. When we do take time to listen to God, He always speaks. As God spoke to Joshua, and the message was loud and clear – Moses was gone, but God's plans and purposes were still very much alive. We've just clearly heard the instructions God gave Joshua: *"Be strong and courageous and take immediate command of my people and lead them across the Jordan River for you shall lead my people to inherit the land that I promised them."*

I can only imagine how Joshua felt when he heard these words; thirty-eight years before he was one of the twelve spies whom Moses had sent into the land of Canaan. Only he and Caleb saw the great possibilities and potential of the land promised to them by God. The others saw nothing but problems and danger. As we are going through a time of great changes and dramatic transition, we - as leaders and followers, must not be short sighted and close minded by seeing nothing but problems and dangers - but rather we must be *“strong and courageous”* – and surrendered to the possibilities and potential God has for us as we seek to fulfill God’s plans and purposes for us.

Previous to this point apathy, unbelief, and disobedience had kept the people of God, who were now under Joshua, from claiming all that God wanted to give them. Such are the same reasons most Christians today fall far short of receiving the spiritual blessings God has promised and provided for them now *in Christ*. In Ephesians 1:3-4 the apostle Paul speaks of those blessings: *“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him.”* This is not about the blessings of God in terms of health, wealth and prosperity but rather about the *“spiritual blessings”* of the Kingdom of God *“in Christ.”*

Paul says here the abundant blessings we have *“in Christ”* are *“spiritual blessings.”* God will always give us exactly what we need. Most times He gives us far, far more. But also God knows that our hearts are easily wooed and captured by worldly blessing - and that worldly blessings can just as easily become the source of our security and strength and identity. True followers of Jesus Christ find their security and strength and identity *“in Christ”* – most specifically *“in”* the crucified and risen Jesus *“Christ.”* This is why the in Colossians 1:19-20 Paul wrote: *“For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.”* The greatest spiritual blessing in Christ is the cross.

Joshua would need this spiritual blessing of faith in the days ahead: those who were in possession of the promised land were a powerful people who lived in strong fortified cities, who maintained a trained army of soldiers who were frequently in battle, always in fighting condition. And the land they lived in was filled with mountains, making both war and travel very difficult. What this means for us is that as we move ahead with God we will face opposition and barriers. We will need the blessing of faith *“in Christ”* to discern the difference between what we want and what God wants.

Praise the Lord that our God never gives a command without promising to help us fulfill His command! He commanded Joshua to grab the horns of leadership and ride into battle; but at the same time He assures Joshua of a lifetime of continuous victory: *“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.”* God will never send us to a place where He has not already been. When faced with a struggle we will often try to fill in for God when He doesn’t come across as we would like. But God never walks out on His promises! The task ahead of us is never greater than His power behind us. God will do as He has promised! Following this affirmation regarding His promises toward His people, God then exhorts Joshua to a threefold call – which are three sources of strength and courage to - *“be strong and courageous.”*

1) God first calls Joshua to be strong and courageous - on the basis of God’s promise: *“For you shall cause this people to inherit the land that I swore to their fathers to give them”* (Joshua 1:6). Joshua could be bold in his decisions and actions simply on the power of God’s promise that he would have victory. So too we can we take risks and endure change because God has promised us victory. *But we must remember that God’s promises are not unconditional.* The fulfillment of God’s promise to win and possess the land before these people was based on Israel’s obedience to God. Be assured that God will not bless disobedience! There is no question that Israel had a right to the promised land; the title was theirs by divine contract. But they would never possess it *totally* and would never enjoy it *fully* until their hearts and their resultant actions were submitted to God.

While our salvation may be assured despite our sinful behavior, the blessings of God are not. Disobedience, selfishness, deceit, and pride do not come from above nor from others. Such things are rooted in the self. God's promises will only come to bud and full bloom when we allow the sinful nature within us to become fertilizer for our growth. Humble confession of sin that is planted within the soil of repentance will yield the abundant fruits that God desires for our lives. Trusting in God promise is an act of God's undeserved mercy and grace - that gives us strength and courage.

2) God also calls Joshua to be strong and courageous - on the basis of the power of the God's Word.

*"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"* (Joshua 1:7-8).

If Joshua truly wanted victory in his conquest of Canaan, God told Joshua he would have to fill his heart, mind, soul, and strength with the truths of God's Word. The record of Joshua's life in the Bible reveals he did so; because of his persistent faith in the Word of God, his entire life was filled with the blessings of victory, achievement, and success. Even Joshua's farewell address, just before his death, was focused on living in submission to Scripture. In his final days Joshua said: *"Be very strong to keep and to do all that is written in the Book of the Law of Moses, turning aside from it neither to the right hand nor to the left"* (Joshua 23:6). Joshua's generation heeded this charge, but succeeding generations refused to be guided by the authority of God's Word. As a result Judges 21:25 tells us: *"Everyone did what was right in his own eyes."* In rejecting the divine objective standard authority as defined by God's Word, instead embracing the subjective standard self-autonomy as defined by personal opinion, Israel was led into centuries of religious apostasy and moral anarchy.

We are witnessing such a decay today. Rejection of God's Word is not only in the culture around us but also often from within the church. We must take warning that there is a deadly cost when we reject biblical values and principles. The Word of God is being diluted to the point that now the source of accountability has moved from the authority of God to the authority of self. Joshua believed, and so must we, that there is a God to whom we must give an account, a God who has revealed Himself and His will for His people through the Holy Scriptures. Strength and courage, as defined by God Himself, will only come by following the truth of the teachings of His Holy Word.

3) Thirdly, God also calls Joshua to be strong and courageous - on the basis of God's presence. *"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 1:9). The challenges that stood before Joshua were enormous. He would lead God's people against physical giants and fortified cities. But the presence of our most holy and mighty God would make all the difference. In the words of Martin Luther, "One plus God equals a majority." Brothers and sisters, if we truly believe our God is who He says He is, we would live bolder and stronger, and more courageous lives. Is He not sovereign and omnipotent and omnipresent and glorious over and above all things – who rules reigns and over every one of our smallest individual decisions and personal choices? If so then His providential, all-knowing, ever-abiding, all-existing, overpowering presence is our victory!

In Psalm 16:8-11 King David wrote: *"I have set the Lord always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be shaken. Therefore my heart is glad, and my whole being rejoices; my flesh also dwells secure. For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption. You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore."* Proverbs 21:1 says: *"The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will."* The presence of God makes us ever more strong and courageous.

II. In the first nine verses we have seen that when God's people hear and affirm God's call - they then understand what it takes to rise to the challenge of being chosen to live out God's plans and God's purposes. But hearing, affirming and understanding are not enough; we are also called obey God's call. And so we now see that when God's people do obediently respond to God's call God will empower us to rise to the challenge of being chosen to live out God's plans and God's purposes.

*And Joshua commanded the officers of the people, "Pass through the midst of the camp and command the people, 'Prepare your provisions, for within three days you are to pass over this Jordan to go in to take possession of the land that the Lord your God is giving you to possess.' "* And to the Reubenites, the Gadites, and the half-tribe of Manasseh Joshua said, "Remember the word that Moses the servant of the Lord commanded you, saying, 'The Lord your God is providing you a place of rest and will give you this land.' Your wives, your little ones, and your livestock shall remain in the land that Moses gave you beyond the Jordan, but all the men of valor among you shall pass over armed before your brothers and shall help them, until the Lord gives rest to your brothers as he has to you, and they also take possession of the land that the Lord your God is giving them. Then you shall return to the land of your possession and shall possess it, the land that Moses the servant of the Lord gave you beyond the Jordan toward the sunrise." Joshua 1:10-15

The Lord had spoken to Joshua; now Joshua speaks to the people. He did so without delay, with confidence in having heard from God. What we are seeing here is the "spiritual chain of command" that God has directed for His people. This is spiritual leadership under God's authority, the same pattern which prevailed in the New Testament church. The pattern many churches follow today is a shift away from this pattern based on human freedom and individual rights. The point here is not whether the congregational system of governance is right or wrong - what is right or wrong depends on our attitude towards authority – which is a problem we've all had since the fall in the garden. At issue is understanding the roles and weight of responsibility – both for leaders and for God's people.

The responsibility of being a leader in this fallen world we live is often more than difficult. That is even more true within the body of Christ because we are also providing leadership in the midst of the unseen spiritual war that exists within the fallen human heart. We see that in the reality in the attrition rate of pastors. Three decades ago, I graduated seminary with 75 other students. Only 12 went into the pastoral ministry. Five years later, only five were still serving churches. Five years later I was the only one left. Statistics tell us that only one of our ten pastors retire as pastors. It looks like I will have the spiritual blessing of being one of those who will retire as a pastor. But the truth is, I easily could have been one of the other nine. Spiritual leadership is a dangerous vocation.

In the eleventh century, King Henry III of Bavaria grew tired of court life and the pressures of being a monarch. He made application to Prior Richard at a local monastery, asking to be accepted as a monk and spend the rest of his life in the monastery. "Your Majesty," said Prior Richard, "do you understand that the pledge here is one of obedience? That will be hard for you because you have been in leadership as a king." "I understand," said Henry. "The rest of my life I will be obedient to you, as Christ leads you to lead me." "Then I will tell you what to do," said Prior Richard. "Go back to your throne and serve faithfully in the place where God has put you." When King Henry died, the epitaph on his headstone read: "This King learned to rule by being obedient."

Brothers and sisters, we are not only called by God to salvation through Jesus Christ – we are also called by God to who we are, where we are, and what we are to do. Malcomb Muggerridge once wrote: "the heart of our calling is not to *something* but to *Someone*." We are not called by God to live for ourselves; in Christ we are called to live for God. James Emery White said: "Independent of any individual calling toward a specific area of life, the primary call is to faithfulness to God." But the reality of God's calling for us is that *God's call will mean difficulty and struggle and transition and change in our lives.* And when those things do come in our lives, we are to humbly serve God and obey God.

Brothers and sisters - we are not called to *have* a spiritual life, we are called to *live out* our spiritual life. And so when we tire of our roles and our responsibilities – our place and what we are doing, both in life and in the church - it helps to remember that God has sovereignly planted us right where He wants us to be. He desires that we be the best mothers and fathers and sons and daughters and sisters and brothers; and husbands and wives and family and friends; and accountants and fisherman and mill workers and tree fallers and business owners and salesmen; and doctors and nurses and carpenters and musicians and cooks; and administrators and counselors and teachers and worship hosts and pastors and elders and deacons and deaconesses and committed, active members of the body of Christ, the church - all for the glory of God. *In whatever and wherever we have been called to in life, we are called to be leaders – leaders of people, pointing people to Jesus.* This is our mission statement - to passionately proclaim the Glory of God in Christ for the joy of all people.

III. Our text closes today with the corporate response by God’s people to commit themselves to rise to the challenge of being chosen to obediently live out God’s dreams and God’s desires for their lives. *"And they answered Joshua, 'All that you have commanded us we will do, and wherever you send us we will go. Just as we obeyed Moses in all things, so we will obey you. Only may the Lord your God be with you, as he was with Moses! Whoever rebels against your commandment and disobeys your words, whatever you command him, shall be put to death. Only be strong and courageous'"* (Joshua 1:16-18).

This response to God’s authority through Joshua’s leadership was wholehearted and enthusiastic. They pledged their absolute loyalty and total obedience to their calling, even to the point of solemnly declaring that anyone guilty of disobedience would be put to death. While that may seem harsh, it was an issue of life or death for them. They knew that they would never reach the promised land without first submitting to the authority of God that had been given to them in the Word spoken by God and written by God - through leaders chosen by God – who are to passionately proclaim the Glory of God in Christ for the joy of all people.

Some years ago in the United States a man named Christian Herter was governor of Massachusetts. One day while he was running hard for a second term in office, after a busy morning chasing votes (and no lunch) he arrived at a church barbecue. It was late afternoon and Governor Herter was famished. As the governor moved down the serving line, he held out his plate to the woman serving chicken. She put a piece on his plate and turned to the next person in line. "Excuse me," Governor Herter said, "do you mind if I have another piece of chicken?" "Sorry," the woman told him. "I'm only supposed to give one piece of chicken to each person." "But I'm starved," the governor said. "Sorry," the woman said again. "Only one to a customer." Governor Herter was a modest and unassuming man, but he decided that this time he would throw a little weight around. "Do you know who I am?" he said. "I am the governor of this state." "Do you know who I am?" the woman said. "I'm the lady in charge of the chicken. So move along, mister." One the greatest challenges of being chosen by God, is that of our call to live in *submission to authority*. The rebellion that began in the Garden of Eden still exists today. In these days of change and transition, we will be challenged.

Friends, in spite of the way we live our lives, we are not in control. Someone else is. It’s not you or me, and it’s not the lady in charge of the chicken. God is sovereignly in control. When we let Him take control, we will cross the river, and we will get to where God wants us to be. If not, we will struggle and wander – anywhere from 12 days to 40 years. In the days, weeks, months and years before us, we will need to be *"be strong and courageous."* But just as the people of Israel had a leader in Joshua whom they could trust, we also have a leader we can trust. Joshua in Aramaic is Yeshua, which in the English is Jesus. As long as we follow Jesus together, we will be united and *"strong and courageous"* together as we seek take possession of the promises of the abundant life we have been promised in Christ as we passionately proclaim the Glory of God in Christ for the joy of all people!