



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

The Jesus of the Old Testament

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PART ONE

Introduction to Series

The Bible we are blessed to have is the repository of some of the greatest wisdom, most moving literature and most significant history of all mankind's time on earth. This greatest and most influential of all books is really a library made up of two separate collections. The Old Testament is a sweeping record of a history and culture of more than a thousand years (and actually begins at the very dawn of time, the so-called "big bang"). Its primary theme is God's engagement in human events, focusing on one particular people group in that critical land-bridge area we call today the Middle East. The first two-thirds of the Bible is the Old Testament, with 39 different books in all. The final third is called the New Testament. It is comprised of 27 books, all written within a short time frame of a few decades and all focused totally on the life, teachings, impact and legacy of a single man from the town of Nazareth in Galilee. Jesus is the sole focus of the New Testament; He is on every page of it. And while these two sections of the Bible are quite different from each other in many ways, there is a surprising and unmistakable unity between them.

For the next few weeks we're going to be spending a few minutes each Sunday in the Old Testament. We'll be getting to know one of the most remarkable and interesting characters within those pages. He is a man of exemplary character, a real role model, even a hero. Many of the Old Testament characters have pronounced flaws and imperfections, but this particular man has no stains or blemishes on

his record. We are going to call him “the Jesus of the Old Testament” for the simple reason that he shares the same name as the central character of the New Testament.

The name **Jesus** in English was pronounced “**Yeshua**” in the common Hebrew dialect of the first century AD (known as Aramaic), but the original name in the ancient Hebrew of 1,200 years earlier was **Joshua**. The names Yeshua and Joshua literally mean “The Lord Saves.” The Angel Gabriel directed Joseph to name Mary’s firstborn son Jesus because He would literally fulfill that role, being the Lord and Savior to mankind. But the Old Testament Joshua/Jesus was given his name by his parents when the people of Israel were still in hopeless slavery in Egypt. Thus it was an expression of their hope and faith that God would one day come to their deliverance. And He did, indeed, use their very son as the instrument of leading them to their promised land.

The Book of Joshua tells this hero’s story. It is an exciting, fascinating read. You’ll find in it lots of action, interesting characters, battle scenes, strategy, intrigue, spies, treachery and valor. But we will focus on only a few themes and ideas that emerge from the adventures of “the Jesus of the Old Testament” —beginning with chapter 1.

After the death of Moses the servant of the LORD, the LORD said to Joshua son of Nun, Moses’ aide: ²“Moses my servant is dead. Now then, you and all these people, get ready to cross the Jordan River into the land I am about to give to them—to the Israelites. ³I will give you every place where you set your foot, as I promised Moses. ⁴Your territory will extend from the desert to Lebanon, and from the great river, the Euphrates—all the Hittite country—to the Mediterranean Sea in the west. ⁵No one will be able to stand against you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you. ⁶Be strong and courageous, because you will lead these people to inherit the land I swore to their ancestors to give them.

⁷“Be strong and very courageous. 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. ⁸Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; 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. ⁹Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go.”

Joshua 1:1-9 (NIV)

A Big Job

The context of our story is presented immediately. Joshua has just been hired by God to do a really big job. It’s a uniquely difficult assignment for several reasons. First, because he has to fill the sandals of one of the true giants of world history, the incomparable leader Moses. Who would want to try to be his successor? Think of the poor schmuck who was hired to replace the legendary coach John Wooden, who led UCLA to 10 national titles. What a ticket for failure that was! In addition, Joshua is being directed to lead an invasion of a heavily-fortified land that is fiercely guarded by a vicious enemy. This might sound similar to what General Eisenhower had to orchestrate at D-Day, but Joshua didn’t have 5,000 ships and 10,000 planes at his disposal like Ike did in landing at Normandy. Instead, his “army” consisted of a bunch of former slaves who had no combat training. This is a daunting task Joshua is called to undertake. Who wouldn’t be intimidated by it—and tempted to say, “No thanks; find yourself another sucker!”

Because of the great risk and danger of failure, it is no surprise that the verses we just read have one key word repeated over and over. The word is “courage.” That is what we will reflect on this morning: the role of **the virtue of courage** in the life of a believer. Because the Bible is provided to us not just as a historic record of what some people of the past experienced but also as a guidebook or instruction

manual for living in every generation and situation, we will consider God's encouragement to Joshua as applying to us as well.

Courage — and Why We Need It

The word "courage" (and its Hebrew counterpart) refers to the "heart." But that does not mean the organ beating 60 or 70 times per minute inside our chest cavity. In the Bible, "heart" usually means our true inner self: our mind, our will, our emotions, that which makes us who we really are. And "courage" means the choice to do the difficult but right thing, even when it would be easier or more convenient or safer to choose the opposite.

Though we think of courage as a heroic moment of self-sacrifice in the midst of danger (a soldier in combat, a firefighter battling a blaze), it is an essential virtue in far more circumstances than just those unusual ones. One of the ways courage has been lifted up in our own times is through the well-known and often-repeated "Serenity Prayer." Attributed to theologian Reinhold Niebuhr and embraced by Alcoholics Anonymous and other 12 step groups, it goes like this:

*God, grant me
the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
the courage to change the things I can,
and the wisdom to know the difference.*

This prayer, which likely many of you have prayed at some time in your life, and maybe often, reminds us that one of the greatest needs for the virtue of courage is in facing the challenges of daily living. AA members claim this prayer because each of them has had to overcome the fears of honesty and self-disclosure and admitting they needed help and were powerless in themselves to overcome their addiction. It takes courage to adopt or serve as foster parent for a child. It takes courage to risk getting married again, after you have been divorced or widowed. It takes courage to go back to school to get a degree after you've been out for awhile. It takes courage to

accept a new and challenging job, and even courage to agree to a weighty volunteer task or responsibility. It takes courage to face down and overcome bad habits and sins and unhealthy patterns.

Like Joshua, we, too, face daunting challenges and obstacles in our own lives. That's why the chorus of encouragement God gives to the Jesus of the Old Testament is so powerful for us to hear today. Listen again: "Be strong and courageous" (1:6); "Be strong and very courageous" (1:7); and "Be strong and courageous" (1:9).

The Change Process

The "serenity prayer" reminds us that one of the greatest barriers to overcome in life is the fear of or reluctance to change. Why is change so difficult for us? Because we easily become comfortable and familiar with our current condition—even if we know it's not our best. Inertia sets in. The thought of doing something different than what we have become accustomed to is hard. We may resist change because we don't know how to do it differently, or we may be afraid of failure. Lots of forces conspire to hold us back, to keep us in our ruts, to restrain us from making the changes that could bring blessing. In those times, the Spirit of God whispers to our consciences the very Words of God as found here in Joshua: "Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid, do not be discouraged. For the LORD your God is with you wherever you go" (Joshua 1:9).

It is that reassurance—that we are never alone, no matter how intimidating our tasks or how uncertain our future or how entangling our current situation—that can get us moving towards a new future to which God is calling us.

Let's think together for our final moments about the change process. It is possible that someone here has been feeling the nudge of the Spirit of God to make some changes, to move in new directions, or to break out of bad patterns that have held you back. How do we do this? Consider these concepts.

1. **We change with help.** We don't need to be strong and self-sufficient. God is here with us, and He provides other helpers to assist us. Pride is a great barrier to progress in our spiritual lives and in all other areas. It feels good to be able to do it all ourselves, but we can't always. And we don't need to. Spouses and friends, pastors and counselors, supportive groups and printed resources are abundantly available. There is no stigma to trusting in others to help. Joshua was not asked to defeat the enemy and conquer the land all by himself.
2. **We change with actions, not just good intentions.** Any action has to start in our minds with an idea or plan or motivation, but that doesn't complete the process. Procrastination is an especially deceptive swamp in which to be caught. Scarlett O'Hara's blissful blindness in "Gone with the Wind" is legendary: "I'll think about that tomorrow." And tomorrow keeps being pushed back. At one point in "The Screwtape Letters," C.S. Lewis's brilliant analysis of the psychology of Christian faith and life, the Senior Tempter counsels his Apprentice Devil on how to keep a believer from making effective changes in his life:

The important thing is, don't let him take any action. As long as it's all sweet emotion and good intention, we're safe. But let your patient actually do something about his intentions to grow spiritually, and all may be lost.

Even if we don't know what all the steps ahead of us will be, taking the very next step is crucial

3. **We change quickly or slowly.** Either way can work. I have known people who stopped smoking or drinking in a single day. And I have known others who needed to go step-by-step on a long process of gradual change. I have known people who decided to diet and drop 20 pounds and that single decision worked. I have known others who have struggled to get off each pound. I have known some who made what seemed to me to be rapid

progress in their Christian growth, and others who climbed up a couple steps only to drop back one. Slow and steady or sudden and dramatic: each of us is unique, and has our own course in life. We will not judge or compare ourselves to someone else, but will follow our own path as guided by our Lord.

4. **We either initiate change, or change will come to us.** We can be proactive or reactive. Choosing to do nothing for awhile doesn't mean that we can stop the flow of time and the inevitability of change. So we have choices. Some have deferred the choice to address their high blood pressure or chest pains until they find themselves in an emergency room. Some have deferred downsizing or moving to a better location until their kids have to do it for them. Some have made God a key part of their lives early on, and others have realized their need of His help when a crisis comes.

The change process is mysterious in many ways, as complex as anything we encounter in life. It is unique to each person and their individual trajectory in life. And yet we can learn from what others have experienced who have gone before us.

Mid-Course Corrections

On one of the Apollo moon explorations, the three-man crew discovered soon after they had blasted off from Cape Canaveral and their booster rocket had separated from the spacecraft that their computer guidance was malfunctioning. For a period of time—until everything could be re-booted and adjusted—the pilot had to closely monitor their position.

Although the moon is a really big object, it is really far away—and it is also moving through vast distances of empty space at a very rapid pace. If the exact trajectory wasn't followed, Apollo could have missed the moon entirely and sailed off into nothingness, rather than safely orbiting and then landing on the lunar surface. And so the Space Center in Houston had to provide to the pilot regular “mid-course corrections” and guidance to ensure that the little spacecraft

stayed on the right path. The astronaut would hear in his ears those instructions from Mission Control about what changes or adjustments to make.

There are many times on our journey through life when we, like the astronauts, need to receive some mid-course corrections to keep us moving in the direction God wants for us. It's nothing to be ashamed of, and certainly nothing to ignore. When we hear God's voice within, as the Apollo pilot heard the voice of Mission Control, let's act on it. The wise and faithful Christian is the one who hears his or her Lord, takes direction, and makes the mid-course correction. ■

