



In 2014 Meriam Ibrahim, a 27-year-old Sudanese woman, spent six months in a Sudanese prison, shackled to the floor, and was sentenced to death for refusing to renounce her Christian faith. She was accused of converting from Islam to Christianity and then marrying a Christian man. She was also sentenced to one hundred lashes for having a child with her Christian husband. All of this could have been avoided if Meriam would have simply denied Jesus, as many before her had done in order to escape punishment and a death sentence. But Meriam refused to recant her faith and without ever compromising her commitment to Christ, she was later released.¹ When interviewed she said, “The situation was difficult but I was sure God would stand by my side.”

I know that is an extreme story and most of us will never face this, but when reading her story this week I was struck by the assurance she had that God would be right there with her through it all. It made me wonder if I have the same type of assurance, that no matter what happens, God will be by my side? What about you? Do you have that kind of hope? Have you ever considered what it means to “be strong and courageous” as you live out your Christian faith in an ever increasing hostile world? I talk to so many of you who are struggling. Struggling with marriage problems, or health problems, or family issues, or parenting concerns, and in it all deep down you’re wondering how to be strong and courageous when everything seems to be falling apart. In the quiet moments you’ve asked yourself, “Where is God in all this?” I find myself there more than I want to admit.

Good morning everyone, my name is Rob and I am one the pastors here at CPC. I’m usually at the North Campus but it is a joy and privilege to be here in Foster City this morning. Today, we are kicking off a new teaching series on the book of Joshua that will go through Christmas and into the New Year. The first five books of the Old Testament are called the books of Law or the Pentateuch. They include Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. Joshua comes right after. It is the bridge book between the giving of the Law and the living of the Law. As we will see, Joshua is one of the most controversial, action-packed, and seemingly blood-thirsty books of the Bible. We are going to come to some hard passages in the weeks to come. Overall, Joshua provides a historical look at Israel as they enter the land

promised to Abraham. The story of Joshua begins with the death of a man named Moses. Look with me at Joshua 1.

God Installs Joshua as His Leader and Promises to be With Him

After the death of Moses the servant of the Lord, the Lord said to Joshua son of Nun, Moses’ aide: “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. I will give you every place where you set your foot, as I promised Moses. Your 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. No 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. Be strong and courageous, because you will lead these people to inherit the land I swore to their ancestors to give them.

“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. Keep 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. Have 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” (verses 1-9).

In order to understand this chapter, we need to try and feel what Joshua and Israel were going through at this point in time. The great patriarch and leader of Israel—Moses—is dead. From Exodus through Deuteronomy, Moses, the deliverer and mediator of Israel has dominated the pages of scripture. It was Moses who lead God’s people out of slavery in Egypt. It was Moses who raised his staff to part the Red Sea. It was Moses who received the Ten Commandments. It was Moses who rebukes Israel for worshipping a golden calf and grinds it up and makes them drink it (I love that scene). I bet life without Moses was impossible to imagine for Israel. He’s mentioned 57 times alone in the book of Joshua. And now, Israel has been wandering for 40 years in the desert because of their sin and disobedience. An entire generation of people have died off and a new generation are finally ready to enter the Promised Land. Then tragedy

¹ <http://www.foxnews.com/world/2014/09/15/sudanese-christian-woman-sentenced-to-death-says-had-god-by-her-side.html>

strikes—Moses dies. This was a time of great crisis and transition for a nation. Joshua has to fill big leadership shoes. But, Joshua was no green intern. Guess who was right there beside Moses through it all? Joshua.

Joshua was a great military leader for Israel who soon became Moses' aide and right hand man. As a young man in Egypt, Joshua saw all the miraculous events recorded in Exodus. Joshua was there when Moses wrote the first five books of the Bible. Joshua got to see great leadership in action. As we look back on his life, we see God sovereignly preparing Joshua for his new role. And when it was time for Moses to select a successor, after confiding with the Lord, Joshua is chosen. But a few years have passed and Moses dies. In this chapter we finally see the transition from Moses' assistant to the man of God who will replace his dear friend, pastor and mentor.

Almost immediately after the death of Moses, God speaks directly to Joshua. By this point, Joshua is no young buck. He's a seasoned leader. There's a sense of urgency and tension in the opening lines of book. The Lord gives Joshua an almost pre-game talk. It's as if God brings Joshua into his office, closes the door, sits him down and speaks words of life into him. What Joshua needed was not advice but encouragement. Joshua was devastated over Moses' death. He knew it was his turn to step up and lead but he was afraid. If he wasn't afraid, why does God tell him three times to be strong and courageous? God encourages Joshua by reminding him of his faithfulness. God helps Joshua to remember all the great promises he's made in the past and his plans to fulfill them.

God Makes Three Promises to Joshua

The Bible is full of promises God has made to his children. And here, God makes three important promises to Joshua. God first promised land. The word *land* is found 87 times because Joshua is a book about Israel entering, conquering and claiming the promised land. Although the land is not theirs yet, God says, "I will give (it) to you." The word *give* is in the past tense strengthening God's sure promise, "I have given it to you." This land is called Israel's inheritance and as we go through this book, we'll hear lots about inheritance. Israel was going to cross the Jordan River and take all the land God has been promising them for centuries. This is the same land God promised Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Moses. David Ogden comments, "In terms of current political boundaries, the promised land would thus cover modern Israel, the whole of Jordan, a large part of Saudi Arabia, half of Iraq, the whole of Lebanon, part of Syria and the whole of Kuwait!"

But, like today, the land was occupied. So God promised victory. The people living in that land were not going to give it up without a fight. What if someone came to your house and said, "Hey, God has given me your house." How would you handle that one? And Israel was not an impressive army of warriors

either. They will face mighty nations, more numerous and with greater war power than Israel. And what we will see is when they trust God, they win; when we trust themselves, they lose. More than anything, Israel needed God to fight on behalf of his people.

Finally, God promised his presence. This is the greatest promise of all and underlines everything God has said. Two times in this passage, God promises to be with Joshua. At the end of the chapter, the three trans-Jordan tribes bless Joshua and ask for God to be with him as well. Even though Joshua was prepared, he still needed to be reminded of God's presence. He needed to know that God will never let him down and will never let him go. Remember, there is no Moses to fall back on! And he couldn't really trust the people; he saw first-hand how weak they were. Even God wanted to give up on them! Joshua needed courage and God gave it to him with the promise of his presence. That was the only assurance Joshua needed. And it's the only promise we need as well.

After these promises, we come to one of the tensions of this book and a tension found in the entire Bible. God's promises and his commands to obey always go hand in hand together. "Abraham, go and I will bless you." "Moses, leave Egypt and I will watch over you." "Joshua, cross the Jordan and I promise to be with you." As followers of Jesus, we need to learn how to both believe God's promises and obey his commands. And his commands are in the Word of God. After laying out three promises, God tells Joshua to immerse himself in his Word if he is going to claim God's promises.

God Commands Joshua to Immerse Himself in His Word

After some much needed encouragement from God, Joshua is commanded to do three things: know God's Word, meditate on God's Word, and obey God's Word. I don't know about you, but I'm a little surprised by that. I would have wanted God to give me a step-by-step strategy for entering the land all outlined on a Google doc. "OK God, so how are we getting across the Jordan River? God, how exactly are we going to have victory over our enemies?" Someone once said, "God's people live on promises not explanations!" Instead of explanations, Joshua is charged to love God's Word. What we'll see in this book is the secret to Joshua's success was not in his military strategies (even though he was a great general), or in his great leadership capabilities (although he was a great leader). His secret sauce, his source of strength, was the Word of God. He's told to "obey it, keep it and meditate on it." God wanted Joshua to be completely immersed in the Word of God because whatever shapes a person's thinking, shapes their behavior and ultimately their life. We can't obey what we don't know. God wanted a close relationship with Joshua and that relationship would be formed on the written Word of God.

What we need more of today are not brilliant people or clever new methods, but obedience informed and motivated by the living and active Word of God. Like Joshua, any Christian leader will face multiple daily decisions to obey God's Word or not to. Obeying God is hardly ever popular; it often times doesn't make sense, and it can be just plain scary to follow God. The temptation in Christian leadership is to ignore God's counsel and wisdom thinking we know better. Just look at any of the men and women in the Bible who failed miserably. All of them fell away from the Word of God. They stopped listening to his voice and because of that God did not give them success.

It's also important to understand that just because Joshua obeys all God's instructions doesn't mean he will succeed. Obeying God's Law perfectly is not the point. That's exactly what got the Pharisees and Sadducees in trouble with Jesus. They loved following rules more than following Jesus. Joshua will succeed because God was with him, helping him to obey his instructions. When this passage talks about being prosperous and successful, it has nothing to do with wealth or worldly success. It has everything to do with accomplishing one's God-given mission on this earth. When God gives you an assignment, he gives everything you need to follow it through. Where God guides, he provides, where God leads he precedes. God promises to be with Joshua but he still needs to step up and lead the nation of Israel. And that's what we see him do next.

Because God is With Joshua, He Steps Out and Leads

So Joshua ordered the officers of the people: "Go through the camp and tell the people, 'Get your provisions ready. Three days from now you will cross the Jordan here to go in and take possession of the land the Lord your God is giving you for your own.'"

But to the Reubenites, the Gadites and the half-tribe of Manasseh, Joshua said, "Remember the command that Moses the servant of the Lord gave you after he said, 'The Lord your God will give you rest by giving you this land.' Your wives, your children and your livestock may stay in the land that Moses gave you east of the Jordan, but all your fighting men, ready for battle, must cross over ahead of your fellow Israelites. You are to help them until the Lord gives them rest, as he has done for you, and until they too have taken possession of the land the Lord your God is giving them. After that, you may go back and occupy your own land, which Moses the servant of the Lord gave you east of the Jordan toward the sunrise."

Then they answered Joshua, "Whatever you have commanded us we will do, and wherever you send us we will go. Just as we fully obeyed Moses, so we will obey you. Only may the Lord your God be with you as he was with Moses. Whoever rebels against your word and does not obey it, whatever you

may command them, will be put to death. Only be strong and courageous!" (verses 10-18).

Leadership is all about influence. If you are a leader and no one is following you, then as John Maxwell says, "He who thinketh he leadeth and hath no one following him is only taking a walk." Joshua was a great leader and had great influence because God was with him. Joshua obeys God and immediately gets to work. He first orders all the officers to tell their people to get their provisions ready. Yes, God will be with them, but they also need to be ready and have enough food for the three-day journey. Remember, at this point, Joshua has no idea how they will cross the Jordan River. Joshua trusted for a miracle, but he still had to prepare.

The final part of this chapter is Joshua's unique instructions to the two-and-a-half tribes who already settled east of the river. Moses gave them this permission only if they joined forces with the rest of Israel whenever Canaan was invaded. When you think about it, these three tribes were set. They had their land and didn't necessarily have to join Joshua. But, Joshua reminds them of what God told them through Moses. He says, "Remember guys? Remember what God commanded you?" I believe the tribes trust Joshua because he knows and remembers God's commands too. Thankfully the leaders respond well to Joshua and God's work in him. They were committed to the greater mission of God. The tribes step up. They take charge. And they even encourage Joshua with a prayer for God to be with him. The tribes are so intense they say, "Hey, whoever doesn't obey you, we'll put them to death!" God is truly with Joshua. Now the people are with him too.

It would have been easy to skip this part of the story but then we'd miss the emphasis of unity among God's people. They needed to fight together because they had a common enemy, a common leadership and a common purpose. Even though Moses has died, the people trust that God's mission continues, that God's presence is still with them, and God's Word will guide them if their leadership remains "strong and courageous."

We Can be Strong and Courageous Because God is With Us

All this is great, but the truth is we are not Joshua. And we can't really put ourselves exactly in his shoes. But, God still calls his people to trust him and obey him no matter what. And the only reason we can be strong and courageous is because God is still with us today. From the very beginning of time, God made a way to be with his people. After God created the universe and everything in it, he was with Adam and Eve in the Garden. God and man living together in perfect fellowship. But man rebelled against God and rejected God's rule over him. So God removed him from his presence. But there was a promise, and the promise was that through a child, through the child of a woman, war would take place and that child would crush the serpent's head

(Gen. 3:15). The child would make war with Satan, and he would be victorious.

Throughout the rest of the Bible we see God's attempt over and over again to be with his people. After the Garden, God was with us through a special covenantal relationship. The Ten Commandments were given and the Old Testament sacrificial system was set up so that God could be with us. As Israel roamed around in the desert, God was with us in the Tabernacle, the portable tent of God, the very place where God would dwell among his people in the Holy of Holies. Throughout the dark period of time when there was no king in Israel and everyone did what was right in their own eyes, God was with us through the Judges and then later a dynasty of kings. Centuries later, God had Solomon build a mighty Temple, a place where God could be with his people once again.

All these things were a shadow of things to come, leading up to God himself, putting on flesh and living among us in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the greater Joshua. Jesus is God with us. Through his life, death and resurrection, Jesus makes a deal with us that we can't refuse. He says, "Give me all of your sin. I'll give you all of my righteousness. And we'll call it even." So, Jesus came to our place, took our place, and invites us back to his place. After Jesus ascended to the right hand of the Father, he gave us the Holy Spirit, a permanent sign of his presence with us.

Today, we can be strong and very courageous only because God is with us, ***"And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age"*** (Matt. 28:20).

If all this is true, if God is with us, why do we struggle so much with fear? Don't you worry a lot? I know I do. Are there things that keep you up at night? Spiritually speaking, I think our problem is many of us don't live like God is really with us, right here, right now. We don't live like God is with us because we don't believe the promise that he is with us. If you truly believed God was with you all the time, what would that do to your fears? How would that give you more courage?

God wants nothing more today than to be with you. God wants to spend eternity with you. So he came. He lived. He died. Then he promises to be with us finally and forever, ***"And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God'"*** (Rev. 21:3). We can be strong and courageous because God is with us and will one day finally be with us forever.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.