

Joshua, a Leader of God's People

“Moses called unto Joshua, and said unto him in the sight of all Israel, Be strong and of a good courage: for thou must go with this people unto the land which the LORD hath sworn unto their fathers to give them; and thou shalt cause them to inherit it.”
—Deuteronomy 31:7

THE NAME JOSHUA MEANS “savior,” the same as its Greek equivalent, “Jesus.” The name Jesus is used twice in the New Testament with reference to Joshua, who was so prominent in the affairs of the Hebrew people during their wilderness journeys and later. (Acts 7:45; Heb. 4:8) Joshua was nearly forty years old at the time of the Exodus and is first mentioned in Exodus 17:9, where we are

informed that Moses appointed him to lead an army of Israelites against Amalek in Rephidim. This choice by Moses and Joshua's later victories over Israel's enemies indicate that he had considerable knowledge of warfare as then conducted.

Later Joshua is mentioned as one of the twelve chiefs of the nation who were sent to spy out the land of Canaan. They spent forty days in this undertaking.

When they returned, the twelve spies were unanimous in their appraisal of the vast riches and great advantages of the country. However, all except Joshua and Caleb insisted that the Israelites would not be able to conquer the people of the land, many of whom, they reported, were giants.—Num. 13:1-33

Joshua and Caleb, in their minority report, gave evidence of great faith in the ability of the God of Israel to help them conquer the land, and they recommended that the Israelites cross over the Jordan River immediately, trusting the Lord to make good his promises to them. The Israelites, however, preferred to heed the majority report. Indeed, if not for the intervention of God, Joshua and Caleb would have been stoned by the rebellious congregation.—Num. 14:1-10

The Lord was greatly displeased with this lack of faith on the part of his people, especially since they claimed that he had led them into the land merely to let them die there by the sword and allow their wives and children to be a prey to the Canaanites. God said to Moses, “How long will this people provoke me? and how long will it be ere they believe me, for all the signs which I have shewed among them?”—vs. 11

The Lord then said to Moses, “I will smite them with the pestilence, and disinherit them, and will make of thee a greater nation and mightier than they.” (vs. 12) Moses prayed to God not to do this because it would give the surrounding nations the opportunity to say that Israel’s God was not able to bring his people into the land which he promised to give them, “therefore he hath slain them in the wilderness.”—vss. 13-16

The Lord replied to Moses, saying, “I have pardoned according to thy word.” (vs. 20) God modified the punishment for the faithlessness and rebellion of the people by decreeing that all the males who were twenty years old or more when they left Egypt would die in the wilderness and therefore would not be permitted to enter into the land of promise. That this might come about in a less precipitous manner than his first plan to destroy all the people by plagues, the Lord decreed that they would be compelled to wander in the wilderness for forty years, a year for each day that the twelve chiefs of the tribes were spying out the land.—vss. 21-34

In this way the ones most responsible for the spirit of rebellion would be punished, and at the same time God’s ability to care for his people would be more than ever demonstrated, because it would be the women, the young, and the children—those in need of greater help—that would be kept alive and finally enter into Canaan and possess it. There were to be exceptions to this sentence upon the males over twenty years of age, these being Joshua and Caleb, the two spies who brought back the favorable report. (vs. 38) Additionally, since Eleazar became high priest following Aaron’s death and was involved in apportioning the land, it is likely he, too, was another exception.—Num. 34:17-19

MEN OF FAITH

Joshua and Caleb are presented to us as men of faith in God, courageously confident of his ability to make good all his gracious promises to his people. The Bible gives little additional information concerning Caleb except to confirm the fact that he did

enter the land of promise, was given his portion of it, and fought valiantly to wrest it from the hands of Israel's enemies. (Josh. 14:6-15) Moses gave a wonderful testimony concerning Caleb, saying that he had "wholly followed the LORD."—Deut. 1:36

Caleb was faithful to the Lord, although apparently adopted into the tribe of Judah, being of the Kenezites by birth. (Josh. 14:6) Nevertheless, he loved the God of Israel, and was happy to be considered an Israelite. Possibly he did not possess outstanding talents as a leader and statesman, so he was not used widely along these lines.

Joshua, on the other hand, likewise faithful to God, possessed natural talents which could be used in the service of his people. So much was this the case, that the Lord commissioned Moses to appoint Joshua to be his successor as leader of the nation. The record of this is found in Numbers 27:18-20, and reads: "The LORD said unto Moses, Take thee Joshua the son of Nun, a man in whom is the spirit, and lay thine hand upon him; And set him before Eleazar the priest, and before all the congregation; and give him a charge in their sight. And thou shalt put some of thine honour upon him, that all the congregation of the children of Israel may be obedient."

JOSHUA'S TASKS

In Deuteronomy 31:23 God, through Moses, gives Joshua these comforting words: "Be strong and of a good courage: for thou shalt bring the children of Israel into the land which I swear unto them: and I will be with thee." Joshua did not succeed Moses as lawgiver, or as a mediator between God and the

nation of Israel, but merely as leader. His tasks were to lead the people into the land of Canaan, direct them in the conquering of their enemies then dwelling in the land, and supervise the division of the land among the twelve tribes.

Soon after the death of Moses, this threefold task was undertaken by Joshua, and the account of his successes, and at times temporary failures, is recorded in the Book of Joshua. In the opening chapter we read God's commission to him: "Moses my servant is dead; now therefore arise, go over this Jordan, thou, and all this people, unto the land which I do give to them, even to the children of Israel. Every place that the sole of your foot shall tread upon, that have I given unto you, as I said unto Moses. From the wilderness and this Lebanon even unto the great river, the river Euphrates, all the land of the Hittites, and unto the great sea [the Mediterranean] toward the going down of the sun, shall be your coast. There shall not any man be able to stand before thee all the days of thy life: as I was with Moses, so I will be with thee. I will not fail thee, nor forsake thee. Be strong and of a good courage: for unto this people shalt thou divide for an inheritance the land, which I swore unto their fathers to give them. Only be thou strong and very courageous, that thou mayest observe to do according to all the law, which Moses my servant commanded thee: turn not from it to the right hand or to the left, that thou mayest prosper whithersoever thou goest."—Josh. 1:2-7

With a background of promise such as this, Joshua had every reason to be courageous in the undertaking assigned to him by the Lord, and he

was. Knowing that God's time had come for the nation to cross over Jordan and possess the land of promise, he did not delay. He summoned "the officers of the people" and instructed them to "pass through the host, and command the people, saying, Prepare you victuals; for within three days ye shall pass over this Jordan, to go in to possess the land, which the LORD your God giveth you to possess it." —Josh. 1:10,11

A SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

The tribe of Reuben, the tribe of Gad, and the half tribe of Manasseh—one of the sons of Joseph—had previously requested that they be permitted to remain on the east of the Jordan River in a strip of land favorable to the raising of cattle. Moses had agreed to this request, but only on the condition that the warriors of these tribes cross over Jordan with the remainder of the Israelites and assist in conquering the Canaanites, and this they agreed to do.—Num. 32:1-42; Josh. 18:7

Joshua knew of this arrangement and said to these tribes that they were to remember the words of Moses concerning them. This portion of the Israelites were already at rest in their inheritance and enjoying prosperity, so Joshua reminded them of their pledge to assist the others, and they readily agreed to keep it. The eligible fighting men of these tribes said to Joshua, "All that thou commandest us we will do, and whithersoever thou sendest us, we will go. According as we hearkened unto Moses in all things, so will we hearken unto thee: only the LORD thy God be with thee, as he was with Moses." —Josh. 1:16,17

These are noble sentiments. The men of these two and one-half tribes promised to obey Joshua, not merely because they esteemed him as a great leader, but because they believed that the Lord was with him, as he had previously been with Moses. This is a sound principle for the guidance of God's people in every age. To the extent that we lend our help to others, it should always be on the basis of recognizing that the Heavenly Father is blessing their undertakings.

RAHAB AND THE SPIES

Joshua was not unaware of the difficulties that confronted the Israelites in crossing the Jordan and entering Canaan. Forty years before this he had served as a spy himself and had noted how potentially strong their enemies were. However, he believed then, and still believed, that the Lord would give his people victories over their enemies. Joshua knew also, nevertheless, that he was expected to use all the wisdom and skill he possessed, and that the Lord would help his people only when they had done all they could to help themselves.

Possessing considerable knowledge of military strategy, Joshua felt that it was essential, first of all, to secure what information he could concerning the current strength of their enemies, that he might have some knowledge of what to expect after they crossed the Jordan. Consequently, he sent two spies to "go view the land, even Jericho." (Josh. 2:1) Joshua knew that almost immediately after entering the land they would be confronted with the walled city of Jericho, and he was anxious to discover, if possible, the size of the army within that

city and other information that might be helpful in planning an attack.

Continuing in verse 1, when the two spies entered the city, they “came into an harlot’s house, named Rahab, and lodged there.” It was reported to the king of Jericho that these two Israelites had entered the city and were now in the house of Rahab. It was correctly assumed that they were spies. When Rahab was requested to bring them forth, she admitted that she had seen the two men, but said she did not know where they were. Actually she had taken them to the roof of her house and concealed them under stalks of flax.—Josh. 2:2-6

Rahab reported further that the men had left about dark. “Whither the men went I wot not,” she said. Then she told those seeking the spies, “Pursue after them quickly; for ye shall overtake them.” The searchers took her advice, unknowingly leaving the spies on the roof of Rahab’s house. Later she let them down over the wall of the city with a rope, this being possible because her house was on the wall. Following her instructions, they hid in the forest of the mountain until they could safely recross the Jordan River and report to Joshua.—vss. 5,15,16

The account is exceedingly brief, and there is nothing to indicate how much the spies learned except what had been reported to them by Rahab. The information she gave them was that the people were terrified at the thought of the Israelites entering the land. “Your terror is fallen upon us,” she said, and “all the inhabitants of the land faint because of you.” Her own testimony was, “I know that the LORD hath given you the land.” The inhabitants of Jericho had heard of the miraculous crossing of the

Red Sea forty years prior to this, and they also knew, as Rahab said, “What ye did unto the two kings of the Amorites, that were on the other side Jordan, Sihon and Og, whom ye utterly destroyed.”—vss. 9,10

Then Rahab, revealing further the great fear of the people, confessed her faith in the God of Israel, saying, “As soon as we had heard these things, our hearts did melt, neither did there remain any more courage in any man, because of you: for the LORD your God, he is God in heaven above, and in earth beneath.” Rahab then asked that the spies arrange for the protection of her family when the city was captured, and they agreed to this.—vss. 11-14

Regardless of Rahab’s past, this eloquent confession of her faith in the true God indicates a genuine desire to be in harmony with him, and the Lord honored her faith. In Hebrews 11:31 she is referred to as one of the ancient heroes of faith. In James 2:25 her “works” of concealing the spies and sending “them out another way” is mentioned as evidence of her justifying faith. Though not an Israelite by birth, she later married Salmon. She became one of the outstanding mothers in Israel and part of the lineage of Jesus, according to the Jewish Law.—Matt. 1:5

CROSSING JORDAN

The spies reported to Joshua what they had learned, emphasizing the great fear of the people, which meant that they could easily be conquered. Evidently Joshua reached the same conclusion, for he at once began to move the people into position for the momentous crossing of the river, bringing

them from Shittim close to the banks of the Jordan.
—Josh. 3:1

The marching orders were set forth in Joshua chapter 3. They were to follow the Ark of the Covenant and were told that when the feet of the priests touched the water, “the waters of Jordan shall be cut off from the waters that come down from above; and they shall stand upon an heap.” (vs. 13) Verse 16 explains that this backing up of the waters took place “very far from the city Adam, that is beside Zaretan.” This indicates the water did not pile up as a perpendicular wall near the place where the priests touched it with their feet, but that the stoppage occurred at a point considerably upstream. The Hebrew word translated “heap” literally means “a piling up.” Today we would say the water backed up, which is what would have to occur to allow the water below to drain from the river bed. What caused the stoppage just at the right time the Bible does not say. To us it was a miracle, and faith accepts it without further explanation.

By this miracle Joshua’s faith was rewarded, and the people’s faith and confidence in him as God’s representative in their midst must have been greatly increased. The priests carrying the ark, when reaching the center of the river bed, stood there until all the Israelites had crossed over. Then the Lord instructed Joshua to command twelve men, one from each tribe, to take twelve stones from the midst of the Jordan and carry them upon their shoulder to where they lodged the first night in Canaan, and leave them there. These were to be a remembrance to later generations of Israelites of the miraculous manner in which the nation was brought over

Jordan. (Josh. 4:1-8) Joshua also took twelve stones and placed them in the river bed where the priests stood, “and they are there unto this day.”—vs. 9

Part 2 of this article will appear in next month’s issue of *The Dawn*. In it we will consider the experiences of Israel under the leadership of faithful Joshua which occurred following their entry into the land of promise. ■