

The God Who Never Leaves or Forsakes His People

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[0:00] Well, we're going to turn to our Bibles and to our reading for today. And we are starting a new series. Paul Bren is going to be preaching in these next few weeks from the book of Joshua.

So if you don't have a Bible, there are some at the front here, some at the sides. At least they used to be. You can't see any at the moment. There are some at the back anyway. If you need a Bible, somebody will happily get you on.

Well, and we're reading in the book of Joshua. Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, and then Joshua, the sixth book of the Bible.

And we're reading together chapter one. And this is the first book after what we call the five books of Moses that come in the first five books of the Bible.

And you'll see this begins 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.

[1:06] Now, therefore, arise, go over this Jordan, you and all this people, into the land that I'm 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, and all the land of the Hittites, to the great sea, towards 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.

I will not leave you.

[2:31] 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.

And Joshua commanded all the officials 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 to 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, Towards the sunrise in the east.

[3:57] And they answered, Joshua, All that you have commanded us, we will do. And wherever you send us, we will go. Just as we obey 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. Amen. And may God bless to us his word. Well, good evening.

Please have Joshua open there in front of you. Joshua chapter 1. That would be a good help to you as we spend a few moments thinking about this opening chapter of the book.

Now imagine that you've been part of a church family for a long time.

[4:59] Maybe decades. Forty years or so. Imagine that's you. There's been ups and downs, of course, in the life of the church. Times of great growth. Times of hardship and difficulty as well.

But through it all, through all the ups and downs, there's been one constant. The senior pastor has been there the whole time. All 40 years.

A faithful under-shepherd of the flock. You've seen him arrive as a young man. You've seen him raise his family. You've seen him bury his parents.

He's faithfully preached the gospel year after year, after all these decades. He's led the church with wisdom and grace. Not perfectly, of course, but faithfully.

A great father in the faith for many years. Before being at the Tron, I was part of two other churches. One I grew up in and the one I was a student at.

[6:05] Both of those churches had ministries of many, many decades. 35, 40, 50 years of one senior pastor. But imagine you were in that church.

And now he's gone. Uncertainty abounds for everybody. It's deeply unsettling. The one who's been leading the church for all those years is gone.

What do God's people, his church, need to know in moments like that? When major change is underway. When the future seems uncertain.

And when things which for so long were taken for granted are stripped away. What do we need then in those moments? Well, the answer, as we'll see in these opening verses, the answer is we need a sure and certain hope.

And that's exactly what we have. Because we belong to a God who is faithful from generation to generation. We can be strong and courageous as we go about God's mission in the face of great uncertainty.

[7:19] God's people here at the start of the book are facing a post-Moses world.

It is hard to emphasize just how big a moment this is for those people to no longer have Moses with them. To be no longer living under his leadership.

Especially at this juncture in their history. Remember what's been going on? After their release from slavery. After hundreds of years of slavery in Egypt, they are released.

And they have 40 long years wandering in the desert. On the way to the promised land. And at last, they arrive on the very brink of the promised land. That's where we join them here at this point.

In many ways, I'm sure the people were elated, excited. They could see over the River Jordan, the promised land. But then the unthinkable happens.

[8 : 28] Just look back one page to the very last chapter of Deuteronomy. Just read these words. Chapter 34, Deuteronomy, verse 1.

And then Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, which is opposite Jericho. And the Lord showed him all the land, Gilead as far as Dan, all Nathali, the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the Western Sea, the Negev, the plain that is the valley of Jericho, the city of palm trees as far as Zoar.

And the Lord said to him, This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob. I will give it to your offspring. I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not go over there.

So Moses, the servant of the Lord, died there in the land of Moab, according to the word of the Lord. And he buried him in the valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth Peor.

But no one knows the place was burial to this day. Moses was 120 years old when he died. His eye was undimmed and his vigor unabated. And the people of Israel wept for Moses in the plains of Moab 30 days.

[9 : 41] Then the days of weeping and mourning for Moses were ended. There was no one. There was no one like Moses.

And there would be no one like him, of course, until the Lord Jesus himself, a greater Moses, would come. What do you need when the great Moses dies?

When there is a land to inherit? There's a great river to cross. Great fortified cities to conquer. What do God's people need at that moment?

What do God's people need today when they find that the earth is shaking beneath them? When everything that once seemed so stable and certain has been stripped away? Well, we need Joshua chapter 1.

When uncertainty comes, we need these verses. Three things to see in this chapter. Firstly, here's the first lesson the writer has for us. Verses 1 to 4.

[10 : 46] Everything has changed, but God's promises haven't. Everything's changed, but God's promises haven't. As we've seen, the book of Joshua picks up where Deuteronomy ends.

Look at verse 1 of Joshua after the death of Moses. That reality must have brought with it great uncertainty and a certain amount of fear, I'm sure.

This generation of Israelites knew nothing other than Moses' leadership. They had grown up under it. He had led them through the wilderness.

The great goal of the promised land. In sight, literally. They can see it. Moses' death. And at the crucial moment, he's gone. And his shadow looms large.

Moses, despite his death, is all over this first chapter. Just listen to the very first verse. After the death of Moses, the servant of the Lord, the Lord said to Joshua, the son of Nun, Moses' assistant.

[11 : 50] Verse 2, Moses, my servant, is dead. Moses is everywhere. Eleven times he's mentioned in this chapter. Moses, Moses, Moses. At the human level, Moses was a colossal figure.

More than any other figure in the Old Testament, he shaped and led God's people. This was a huge thing for him to have died. It's hard to think of equivalence, really, but the only one I can think of was Billy Graham.

A man of huge influence. Preached to more people in history than anybody else. And he died not too many years ago. A huge figure. Gone. And with the death of Moses, a huge shadow cast over the people.

Everything's changed. Everything, that is, apart from the promises of God. That's the resounding note of this opening chapter. Yes, Moses has died.

We need to feel the weight of that. But God's promises are bigger. They are even bigger than Moses. That's the big message of this whole first section of the whole book of Joshua.

[13:06] The faithfulness of God. He is a God. He keeps His promises. That's the big message through this opening section. And notice the other repeated word and idea in chapter 1.

Yes, we see Moses repeated. But God, again, keeps saying that He is giving the people this land. Yes, Moses is dead.

But the promise of the land still holds. Notice verse 2, verse 3, verse 6, verse 11, verse 13, verse 15. I am giving, says the Lord.

I have given. I'm giving you this land. I will give it to you. I'm giving you this land. Again and again it's repeated. The Lord has promised this land and He is giving it to them.

Yes, Moses is gone. But I am giving you the land. And it's a promise He keeps. Let me read to you from the very end of the book of Joshua.

[14:05] Don't turn there. But in the very last chapters we read this. Thus the Lord gave to Israel all the land that He swore to give to their fathers.

And they took possession of it. And they settled there. And the Lord gave them rest on every side just as He had sworn to their fathers. Not one of all their enemies had withstood them.

For the Lord had given all their enemies into their hands. Not one word of all the good promises that the Lord had made to the house of Israel had failed. All came to pass.

The land that God promised to give, He gave. God is faithful. This is so much bigger than one man.

These promises that they are looking at here, the promises of a land, they stretch back through the generations. These, central to all that God says to Joshua here, is the age-old promise of the land.

[15:10] It is the land, verse 3, that was promised to Moses. But it's a promise that goes far further back. The promise has its very roots in the earliest chapters of the Bible.

In Genesis 2, we read about God placing His people, Adam and Eve, in the Garden of Eden. A place where they enjoyed God's blessing. Where they enjoyed perfect rest.

But as we know by Genesis 3, they've been excluded from the garden, excluded from the land. But you read on, Genesis 12.

God made a glorious promise to Abraham that He would again bring His people into a land that would be theirs. A place where they would know rest. A place they could live.

A place to call their own. And all through Genesis, you read again and again of this promise of a land, of a place. Genesis 12, Genesis 13, Genesis 15, Genesis 17, Genesis 24.

[16:10] Again and again, God promised, I will give you this land. God had promised that. He had promised the land and yet, that was not fulfilled.

Even by this point, hundreds of years later, they still hadn't taken the land. God's people were not yet in the place He promised. But God's promise is a sure thing.

What God has said He will do. And Joshua is the book where we see that promise at last being fulfilled. This is the book where the people do enter the land.

They take possession of it. And you see, God's promises, they are certain. Despite great leaders passing away.

The people would no doubt have felt great, great sorrow at the passing of Moses. Great grief. And yet, God's promises weren't contingent on any one leader.

[17:18] Moses dies, but the promises live on. God's fidelity to His promise didn't evaporate with Moses' death. God's kingdom does not depend on personalities.

No, no. His kingdom depends on His promises, doesn't it? And that's greatly reassuring, isn't it? We get wrapped up in celebrity culture.

We need the big charismatic figure. No, no. You need God's promises. And as Willie's father, James Phillips, puts it in his notes on this chapter.

He said, God does not keep His special promises for big men, but gives them to all His children. Not many of us in this room feel like big men, do we?

But all of us, if you follow the Lord, you are one of His children. And His promises are for you. You don't need to be a big man. He gives His promises to you.

[18:24] And that should encourage us. Perhaps challenge us. God's promises live on, despite a great leader, a leader who you look up to, respect perhaps, or very thankful for on a human level.

The Lord has really used them to bless you. That's wonderful. We thank the Lord for men like that. Perhaps they led you into the kingdom. They were really crucial for you. But now they're gone.

But hear this. God's promises haven't gone. God's promises live on, despite their passing. Perhaps that person's moved on to a new ministry.

Perhaps they've retired. Perhaps they have died. But God's promises are certain, despite that happening. Despite great leaders moving away, His promises endure.

So here's the warning for us. Don't make an idol out of God's servants. Don't place your trust in them, because it's only God's promises that abide.

[19:32] And we know they abide, because of the one who fulfills all those promises. In the Lord Jesus, the greater Moses, the greater Joshua, all those promises find their ultimate fulfillment.

The one who defeated death, who reigns now at the right hand of God the Father, who will return to usher in His new creation, the new Eden, the new Jerusalem, the land where we'll enjoy perfect rest.

The Lord Jesus has fulfilled that. That rest that we yearn for, we find it in the Lord Jesus. And that is a great comfort when we face uncertain times.

Great leaders in the church will be cut off by death. They may fail in the middle of their ministries, but the faithfulness of God never fails.

That's the big thing. That's where we're to hook our hope, in His promises. His great power is not tied down to human leaders, great and gifted they may be.

[20:43] When they go, He will have others waiting in the wings to come in and carry on the work. Everything may change.

Everything had changed for God's people here on the edge of the promised land. Moses had gone. But God's promises hadn't. That's the first key lesson that God's people then and today must grasp hold of.

God's promises, they never fail. They never disappear. even though God's leaders might. Number two, here's the second thing, verses 5 to 11.

Here's the second thing that God's people need to know. Key leaders may have gone, but God's presence endures. His promises never fail.

And secondly, His presence endures. The key sentence in the second half of verse 5, look down with me at that. Here's the Lord's word to Moses.

[21 : 49] Just as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will not leave you or forsake you. Again, look at verse 9.

Do not be frightened. Do not be dismayed. For the Lord your God is with you wherever you go. Can you imagine the impact of hearing this promise if you're Joshua?

Hearing these words from the Lord. He perhaps knew it in theory, but to have these words uttered by God Himself, to hear Him say, just as I was with Moses, I'll be with you, Joshua.

Surely, that would have put a steel in His spine for all that He knew that lay ahead. The crossing of the Jordan, the taking of Jericho, every subsequent battle. God promised to be with Him, to never leave or forsake Him.

It's knowing that reality that helps Joshua do all that he goes on to do. It is because God first promised His presence that He can then tell Joshua to be strong and courageous.

[23 : 07] Verses 6, 7, and 9. That's the implication of God being with Joshua. He says, go, be strong and courageous. It wasn't that Joshua was being asked to stir himself up, to grit his teeth, to run into battle, to be strong and courageous.

No, no, no. He is only strong. He's only able to be courageous because God is with him. And just as God promises to be with Joshua, He's promising to be with all His people.

Joshua was now, he was now the leader of God's people, just as Moses was. And just like Moses, he was the representative of God to the whole people. And he was the representative of the whole people to God.

And so when God promises to be with Joshua, He's promising to also be with the people that Joshua represents. And these words would have brought huge comfort to all the people, don't you think?

A monumental task lies ahead of them. An inheritance to claim, battles to be fought, but undertaken without Moses, really? Can we do that?

[24 : 32] It was already an impossible task, but now it seems doubly difficult without Moses. Remember, this was the task that their parents, the previous generation, had turned away from.

Even with Moses, going about 40 years previous, they refused to go in, they were too scared. Would these people now go where their parents refused to go?

Even without Moses? Well, it was to those people that God promised here.

The God of Moses promised to be with them, to never leave, to never forsake them. And remember who this God is, the God who parted the Red Sea to enable that first generation to flee out of Egypt.

The God who did that promises now to be with them. This is no small God. This is the God of all creation, the God who brought everything into being. He's promising to be with them.

[25 : 38] Moses had died, yes, but God is still the same, yesterday, today, and forever. And He's present with Joshua, with all the people to help and deliver them. In light of that, Joshua and God's people could be strong and courageous.

God is with us. It's like you've been told to go into the boxing ring. You've never boxed in your life and you've got this fearsome opponent to fight.

It's like you've got Muhammad Ali or Mike Tyson right behind you, present with you. Your fear evaporates, doesn't it? Who's with you?

You're confident of victory because of who is beside you. And God's people had God. He was with them, present with them. That's all very well for them, you might think.

That's great for them. God's made this promise to Joshua. How encouraging for them. But what about us? What about me? Well, listen to these words that Willie opened the service with from Hebrews 13.

[26 : 54] Here's what the writer says to the New Testament church. Keep your life free from money and be content with what you have.

For he has said, I will never leave or forsake you. So we can confidently say the Lord is my helper. I will not fear.

What can man do to me? See, the apostle is taking that promise that God gave to Joshua. He's applying it to New Testament believers.

We can, in this sense, put ourself in Joshua's place. We're not the man that he was. We're not given the same task. And yet God says to us, as I was with Joshua, the Joshua who brought down the walls of Jericho, as I was with him, so I'll be with you.

And there's nothing more essential, is there, for God's people than to hear that. To hear their God repeating to them again and again in all the changing circumstances of life, to hear these words, I will be with you.

[28 : 03] I will not forsake you. We may be facing real hardship at this very moment, perhaps as individuals, health concerns, financial concerns, relational concerns.

There may come times as a church where together we face real hardships, real battles. We don't know how things will go. We can't see the future. We're full of fear.

But no matter what comes, the Lord does say to us, He says to you, I will be with you. I will not forsake you.

And so we can be strong. We can be courageous as we go about serving the Lord and His purposes. personal loss and tragedy may come.

But no matter what comes, the Lord says to you, I will be with you. I will not forsake you. Problems with your job may arise.

[29 : 14] But no matter what comes, the Lord says to you, I will be with you. I will not forsake you. Both now and for eternity. I'm with you. Relational issues may cause you real hurt and sorrow.

But no matter what comes, the Lord says to you, I will be with you. I will not forsake you. Both now and for all eternity. These are words of real comfort for us, aren't they?

And we need these words. But notice what God's presence is tied up with. It is inseparable from a close and careful obedience to His words.

That is how God's people then and in every age really know the reality of God's presence. Look at verses 7 and 8. God has just made this great promise in the middle of verse 5, I will not leave or forsake you.

Verse 6, Be strong and courageous for you shall cause this people to inherit the land that I swore to their fathers to give them. Verse 7, Only be strong and very courageous, being careful to do according to all the law that Moses my servant commanded you.

[30 : 28] Do not turn from it from 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.

It's just what we've been hearing from James, isn't it, in recent weeks. A careful, constant, absorbing of the word of God must lead to obedience of it.

A care to obey what the law has commanded us. We can't expect to know God's presence if we ignore his ways, go our own way.

No, no. Be careful to do all according to the law. And the key part of that is being amongst God's people.

A determination to be with God's people and around his word wherever we can is going to aid us in our obedience to God's word, to the enjoyment of his presence. And so the last thing that you should do when you are fearful and anxious about what lies ahead is to stay away from God's people.

- [31 : 48] The very place where God promises to be with us as we gather around his word. As together we sit, listen, and seek to obey. That is what we need.

That's how we enjoy the reality of God's presence. Key leaders may have gone but the presence of God endures with his people.

That's the second thing we need to know. And here's the third. Third thing in this chapter, we see God's people together are to be strong and courageous.

God had reiterated his promise and his presence and that is met with united obedience from the people. That's what we see in the last paragraph here from verse 10 to the end.

Joshua has heard the promises of God. He's determined to now go in and take the promised land. He rallies the troops, verses 10 and 11. But notice a slightly surprising detail in the text.

- [32 : 49] Look at verses 12, 13 and 14. particular instructions are given to some of the tribes, to the Reubenites, the Gadites and the half-tribe of Manasseh.

Now what's going on there? It seems rather odd that these particular tribes are singled out. Well you can read about the background to this in Numbers 32. The Reubenites and the Gadites, they asked Moses if they could take land east of the Jordan as their inheritance.

The problem is the land of Canaan which is promised to Abraham and Moses is on the west of the Jordan. That's what God had promised. And so a deal was struck with Moses and those tribes.

They could take the land east of the Jordan if they assisted the rest of the tribes gaining their inheritance on the west of the Jordan. They would have to send their able-bodied men over the Jordan to go and take the land on the west.

Only then if they did that could they return and settle on the east of the Jordan. And here in Joshua 1 those promises that they made back in Numbers 32 those promises are being cashed in.

- [34 : 05] Joshua saying remember what you said to Moses you would come over the Jordan with us and fight. Now's the time to do it. Now imagine you're one of those tribes.

Pretty tempting. You've arrived. Here's the Jordan River. You've arrived on the east. You've got nice lands. Your family's getting settled down. Do you really want to go west over the Jordan and fight battles?

Probably not. You want an easier life on the east of the Jordan. But look what they do. They've remembered those promises they made and they agree to go.

They align themselves with the whole people of God. They willingly send their men of fighting age to join the conquest. They align themselves together as a unity with the rest of God's people. Only at the end of the book of Joshua chapter 22 do we see them returning to their land east of the Jordan.

So here's the key moment. Would they go and fight with the rest of their brothers? The answer is yes they would. And that is so key actually for us to grasp as God's people today.

- [35 : 22] When hardship uncertainty difficulties come we can be assured of God's promises and his presence but we must together stand firm united not going off to suit ourselves no rather we are to care more about the overall health of the whole body caring about the whole church more than ourselves.

These few tribes they could have looked after their own needs their own interests but no they see the whole picture they see the whole body. See God hasn't given us his promises and his presence so that we can be selfish and look after our own needs.

No he's given his promises and his presence so that we might serve. And that's what God's people do here. These two and a half tribes together serve in the conquest.

And it's that unity that commitment to one another helps the other tribes to serve as well. How encouraging for the other tribes to see these other guys pitching in we're coming with you. I don't know about you but seeing others in the church family sacrificially serving faithfully serving that helps me do you likewise to keep serving even when it's difficult seeing others serving helps me know in a very real way that God is with us he's not abandoned us he is with us his promises they are sure aren't they he hasn't left us he's not forsaken us and so we must draw together unite around our great goal our great task of seeking and saving the lost in our city in every nation that we might together save some and help them mature as Christians by ourselves that task seems overwhelming doesn't it but then you look around and you see others with you keeping on how encouraging that is and that's the encouragement of Joshua chapter 1 yes hard times may come uncertainty may be our experience but God's promises his presence they are utterly unaffected by any of that as I was with

Moses and Joshua and Samuel and the prophets and Paul and Peter and all the leaders of faith down the centuries so I will be with you to hear that to hear God's promise of his presence to receive it to know it that is to face the future without fear or doubt it is to face the future with certainty and courage strength because the Lord says to you each one of you he says I will never leave you I will never forsake you and that is the encouraging message of Joshua 1 no matter what comes the Lord is with us let me pray and then we'll sing together our heavenly father we thank you for your great promises and how we need to hear them so easily we forget so easily we get caught up on our own concerns anxieties our own little worlds the Lord your word never changes your promises never fail every one of them you will keep and so please help us together as a church and as individuals to know that your promises never fail help us to know the reality of your presence with us and so help us to be a people that live not by sight but by faith for we ask it in Jesus name

[39:38] Amen