

Israel's New Beginning (Joshua 1:1-9)
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(Notes/Transcript)

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Life is full of changes. History is full of changes. God keeps doing new things.

We see it in biblical history, as God moves his people through various stages towards maturity, from the time of Abraham to the period of the Judges to the monarchy, finally to the gospel. We see it in world history, as empires and cultures come and go from the global stage.

And we see it in the short history of our own lives. In fact many of us can probably remember a lot of momentous transition points in our lives: your first day of school, first day on the job, graduation, your wedding day, the day your first born child was born.

Every change, however big or small, is a test. Every change is a trial God puts us thru to see how we'll respond.

Today is no different. Today is a day of change. It's a new beginnings for me and for you. Today is certainly a change for me, as I begin pastoring a church. I've been on church staffs for 10 years but today I find myself in a new role. And it's a change for you, too, who consider Reformed Heritage your church.

As I was thinking about this situation we're all in, the one passage that kept tugging at me was this text from Joshua 1. Why? The book of Joshua is about change. It marks the end of one period of Israel's history and the beginning of a new period.

The book begins with the death of Moses. Moses had led the people out of slavery in Egypt. He led them in wilderness. But now Moses is gone. And so the question is, "Who will lead the people now, as they go forth to conquer the land?" The people have left Egypt, but the exodus is really only half complete. They still haven't entered the new Eden of the promised land, the land flowing with milk and honey.

Now, I know what you are thinking: Is our new pastor about to tell us he's our Joshua, who's going to lead us in conquering Birmingham? Did we call a guy with a messianic complex?! Well, no, that's not exactly what I have in mind. I have no pretensions about what I can do, and that's not how I intend to use the analogy here.

There are two important things to notice about the figure of Joshua.

On the one hand Joshua points back to Moses. He does all these Moses-like things:

- Moses led the people thru the Red Sea on dry ground. Joshua (chap.3) will lead them across the Jordan River on dry ground.
- Moses met with the Lord at the burning bush, and took off his shoes because he was on holy ground. Joshua meets with the commander of the Lord's army and also takes off his shoes (chap. 5).
- Moses is called the "servant of the Lord." Joshua is as well.

So Joshua is a new Moses. But that's not all. Joshua not only points back to Moses--he also points forward to Jesus Christ, the Greater Joshua.

The story of Joshua paves the way for the gospel.

In fact, the name "Jesus" is just the Greek version of the Hebrew name Joshua. Of all the OT figures the Messiah

might have been named after, the Lord chose Joshua.

Jesus is the New Joshua.

He does what the first Joshua did, but in a greater, transformed way:

- Jesus begins his public ministry in all four Gospels in the area right around the Jordan River, right where Jericho once was, right where Joshua began his conquest of the land.
- Just as Joshua faced opposition from the kings of Canaan and its inhabitants, so Jesus faced opposition from King Herod and the Israelites.
- Just as Joshua brought down the walls of the wicked city of Jericho, so Jesus said that “not one stone would be left upon another,” that the wicked city of Jerusalem would be judged.
- Just as Joshua rescued a harlot, Rahab, from Jericho, so Jesus rescued an adulteress from the Pharisees.
- Just as Joshua was a warrior who went forth conquering and to conquering, so Jesus is an even greater warrior, engaged in a greater conquest with a greater sword, described in Revelation 19 as the sword of his Word coming forth from his mouth.
- And while Joshua's conquest was limited to the land of Canaan and brought death to the Gentiles, the greater Joshua will conquer the whole earth, not to condemn the nations but to bring them his salvation.

Well, what does it all mean for us?

I imagine that when Joshua took over for Moses, he was a bit afraid of what was ahead. And he needed to be afraid! The task was daunting, filled with unknown challenges.

Joshua, remember, had been one of the twelve spies sent into the land a generation earlier. He had seen with his own eyes the giants and the walled cities he'd have to fight against.

I'm sure all the people felt weak and scared. They wondered if God would still be with them, if he would be for them. Would they win the battle?

In the midst of this time of transition, God comes and tells Joshua, as the leader and representative of the people, “Be strong and courageous.”

That was God's word to Joshua and to Israel -- and through them, it's God's word to us.

(I don't know about you, but I'm certainly a little bit afraid!)

Three reasons emerge from this passage why Joshua and the people should be strong and courageous as they move into this new phase in history. They're 3 reasons we should be strong and courageous as well:

We have God's promise.

We have God's pattern.

We have God's presence.

First, we have God's promise.

What had God promised? All the way back in Gen. 12, God promised Canaan to Abraham's descendants. Now God says that promise will come to fruition.

Look at 1:3-4: “Every place”

We can fight to win because God's promise assures success.

We have powerful enemies that stand in our way. Traditionally the church has identified its enemies as the world, the flesh, and the devil. These are our Canaanites.

- The world -- in rebellion against God, tempting us, seducing us, drawing our affections away from Christ, attempting to squeeze us into its mold.
- The flesh -- the insidious enemy within. As those who have been united to Christ, sin's reign has been toppled in our lives. Sin has been dethroned -- but it wants its crown back. Sin still wages a kind of guerilla warfare against us. That's what Paul called the flesh -- the residue of our fallenness that remains even after we've been joined to Christ. Sometimes the flesh is called the old man or old Adam. Martin Luther put it really well. He said, "The old Adam was drowned in baptism (Rom. 6), but the old Adam swims well!" We have to fight sin within. We have the fight of our lives inside our own hearts.
- And the devil (Yes, Virginia there is a Devil!) -- Paul said in Eph. 6 that we have to put on the whole armor of God to stand against the wiles of Satan. There's a lot of mystery here, but through our prayers, our acts of kindness, and our faithfulness, Satan's kingdom is conquered and Christ's kingdom gets the victory. Our whole lives are played out as soldiers in this cosmic battle between the Lord and Satan.

These are our Canaanites -- the world, the flesh, the devil. These are the giants and walled cities we must fight.

Most importantly, we can fight to win, we can fight with confidence, because we know that Christ, our greater Joshua, has already won the definitive battle for us. He defeated the world; he defeated the flesh; he defeated Satan, through his cross and resurrection.

We can fight with strength and courage because we know what has been promised us is sure. And what's that promise? Not only Canaan, but the whole earth (Rom. 4). God has promised us paradise restored and consummated, resurrected bodies in a resurrected creation. Wherever your foot treads -- it belongs to you! In the end, everything belongs to the people of God (1 Cor. 3) -- but even now, before the final resurrection, the promise comes to realization as the gospel of grace runs through the earth.

So as we move into this new era, we must not forget God's promise. Whatever we accomplish, whatever growth and maturity we attain to together, whatever success we have, whatever battles we win -- it's all due to God's promise, God's grace, God's power. We can't do anything in our own strength. But fear not -- we stand upon the promises of God.

Second, we have God's pattern. The second reason to be strong and courageous is given to us in 1:7-8: "..."

For Joshua, the pattern was Moses' law. That was his book. If Joshua walked that path, he was sure to find victory.

We have something even better. A bigger book -- a completed book. The greater Joshua did not annul or abolish the law of Moses; he fulfilled it. That law was crucified with him and rose with him, transformed and glorified on the third day.

What is the greater pattern we've been given? It's the law of the Greater Joshua and the Greater Moses. It's the law of Christ, as Paul called it. It's the pattern of his self-sacrificial love. Think of what Jesus says in John 13 -- the new command he gave to his disciples, that we would love one another as Jesus has loved us. Jesus says, "Love as I love."

That pattern was shadowed in the law of Moses, but it was embodied and came to full realization in Christ himself. He is our model. That's the mold you're to pour your life into, so that your life becomes Christ-shaped.

And so God says to us, to paraphrase verses 7-8 in NT terms, "As you do according to all the law Jesus Christ, my servant commanded you, and do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, as that law of love does not depart from your mouth, but as you meditate on it day and night, then you will be notorious then you will be prosperous and have success."

Jesus is the law incarnate. He is love incarnate. He is the pattern we're to be conformed to. We're to walk in his path -- and if we do so, we'll find abundant blessing.

So: How do we make a smooth transition at Reformed Heritage? How do we get the victory in whatever battles we're called to fight? We practice the law of love.

Times of change, especially in churches, are often times of quarrelling and bickering and power plays. But an army divided against itself will lose every time. It's only as we follow the law of God, the law of Christ, the law of love, that we can be assured of God's blessing. It's my prayer that every step we take, and every change we make, however big or small, is permeated with love, so that even if (or when) there's disagreement we can handle with patience and humility. In that way, the old can blend with the new, and we can grow together towards maturity.

That's my vision for us.

But it's easier said than done. It's easy to fool ourselves.

Let me give you one example. In a lot of churches, love of theology has replaced love of people as the mark of the church. Theology is important of course. But we are not going to be a church only for the people who have it all figured out. (Really, none of us do anyway).

The church is not a theology club. It's a community of love and service and friendship and mercy. That's the kind of people we need to be.

The third reason to be strong and courageous is God's presence. God is with us.

Look at 1:5: "as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will not leave you nor forsake you."

Look at 1:9: "Be strong and courageous; do not be afraid nor, nor be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go."

God's presence gives us strength to fight, even when we face giants and walled cities.

But where and how do we experience God's presence? How does God keep his promise to be with us?

My answer may sound odd, but it's really not. This has got to be central to who we are as a community.

We seek God where he has promised to be found, which means most especially in the church, in worship, in word and sacrament. God's saving presence is found in the means of grace, in word and sacrament. The word and sacrament are effectual means of salvation, through which God gives himself to us, through which he makes himself present to us.

Note: This is not saying salvation comes from Christ *plus* the sacraments, but rather Christ applies salvation through the sacraments (as well as the word). This is how he gives us himself and his benefits.

God is present with us in his means of grace.

Luther put it well: "He who would find Christ must find the church. He who would know something of Christ must not trust himself or his own reason, but must go to the church, for outside of the church there is no truth, no Christ, no salvation. In the church great wonders daily occur -- such as new life, forgiveness and triumph over death."

God's presence gives us strength and courage. Think of the way disciples like Peter were transformed by being with Jesus. "How could these simple fisherman speak with such force and power?," they wondered. Then they remembered they had been with Jesus (Acts 4:13). Being with Jesus changed them. Jesus rubbed off on them. They were scared they were ignorant, but the presence of Jesus made them bold and gave them the right words to say.

But how can you be with Jesus? How can we encounter his transforming presence? Again, the Reformers answer for us. They said,

Wherever you have baptism,
Wherever you have the word preached,
Wherever you have the Lord's Supper celebrated
There, you have Jesus.

The presence of God with us is the key. This is the central promise of Scripture – God is with us, he dwells with us and within us. He is present with us in a special way in worship.

We get the victory in our holy war thru faithful worship. In fact, a lot of the battles Joshua fought look more like worship services than anything else. Think about the battle of Jericho. Priests (worship officials) lead the way. They carry God's ark (the place of worship). Trumpets are blown that were normally used for worship. It's a seven day battle -- Jericho falls on a Sabbath (the day of worship). Holy war is really liturgical warfare.

When the church worships the walls fall, the world is conquered, the world is changed. Liturgy is more powerful than politics or anything else. The strongest weapons are the weapons God has given the church.

This is how it had to be. God had already previewed it. Generations earlier, Abraham walked through the land, not to settle down, but to scout it out, to see what God promised him. And everywhere he goes, he sets up altars -- at Shechem, Bethel, Ai, and the Negev. Jacob does the same a little later.

That liturgical tour of the land was a sort of "pre-conquest," the "conquest before the conquest." Worship comes first, then dominion. We worship our way to victory.

You worship God faithfully and everything else in your life will follow that; everything else will fall into place.

As we move into this new phase of life we must not forget what got us here. We must not forget the centrality of the church, the centrality of worship. This is the key to our vision -- participating faithfully and joyfully in covenant renewal liturgy each Lord's Day, not forsaking the assembling together of brethren, but participating in the fellowship of the covenant people. God is present with us, through one another, and through the means of grace. As we move into a new era, our gathered worship will lead the way. It's the church's cutting edge. It's our battering ram against all enemy fortresses.

Let me close with something from Augustine.

I started off by saying that life is about change and these changes are tests from God.

Every change is mini-crisis, and God wants to see how we'll react. Well, Augustine lived during a time of great change. He lived through the fall of the Roman Empire.

(Hopefully our transition here at Reformed Heritage won't be quite that chaotic! But what he said is still appropriate.)

Listen to what Augustine wrote in his *City of God*. He wrote these words just as Rome was cracking and falling into pieces. Many Christians were despairing. Augustine told them to not give up hope. He compares changes and trials to being put into a furnace.

[Preacher's paraphrase:] "For the same fire that causes gold to glow brightly causes chaff to smoke; under the same flailing, grass is beaten small, while grain is cleansed. And thus it is that in the same affliction the wicked detest God and blaspheme, while the good pray and praise. It makes no difference what ills are suffered. What matters is the kind of man who suffers them."

A time of change reveals our character -- what we're made of.

God is putting us in his furnace.

What kind of people are we going to be? What kind of church?

Will we be grass that goes up in smoke or gold that glows?

Will we be strong and courageous?

Will we rely on God's promise, or our own resources?

Will we live by the law of Christ, the law of love, or will we walk our own path? Will we conform to God's pattern or the world's pattern? Will we seek God's presence to be found, among his people and in the means of grace of word and sacrament?

Let's pray and ask God to help us.