

reading the Bible with Luther



Session 10: Joshua's Story of the Promised Land

by Virgil Thompson

As the people of Israel are poised to enter the Promised Land, Moses has died and the reins of leadership have passed to Joshua. The Biblical account of how the mantle of leadership passed from Moses to Joshua is remarkably brief: “*Joshua son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom, because Moses had laid his hands on him; and the Israelites obeyed him, doing as the Lord had commanded Moses*” (Deuteronomy 34:9). If the church is the creature of God’s Word, as Lutherans confess, then this verse would be a good place to listen when it comes to educating and calling leaders.

The Spirit of Wisdom

The Bible tells just one thing about Joshua: he was full of the Spirit of wisdom. No doubt Joshua had many other good qualities, but the Bible mentions only this one—perhaps because nothing else matters as much when it comes to leading the people of faith into the land of God’s promise.

Luther for one was listening. In one sense the whole course of the Reformation was, and remains, nothing more than the proclamation of what he heard. Without the Spirit of wisdom, leaders of the church will lead us circling endlessly in the wilderness of Shittim, which is a place barren of the promise of God. As Luther never tired of pointing out, the question ever before the church is: *What exactly is the Spirit of wisdom by which the people of faith are led into the land of God’s promise?* It is a question only the Bible can answer. For that reason the church never outgrows the old, old story.

Joshua had the wisdom to distinguish the **demanding** word of the Lord from the **giving** word of the Lord. The wellbeing, in fact the very future, of faith depends on a preacher who knows how and when to speak these two words of the Lord.

The **demanding** word of the Lord admonishes the believer to do and not do, and makes clear what will result accordingly. This is the way Joshua spoke to the people as they were about to enter the Promise Land: “*This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth,*” he declared to the people. “**IF** you

meditate on it day and night, so that you are careful to act in accordance with all that is written in it THEN you shall be successful” (Joshua 1:8). In other words, God speaks to His people in such a way that keeps us on our toes, minding the do’s and don’ts He has legislated for the good of everyone.

God also speaks a **giving** word to His people. As Israel was about to enter into the Promised Land, Joshua said,

BECAUSE *I am the LORD your God and keep my promise, THEREFORE, you may “cross over the Jordan ... into the land that I am giving ... to the Israelites No one shall 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 not fail you or forsake you.”*

(Emphasis mine.) — Joshua 1:2-6

Can you hear how the *demanding* word of the Lord differs from the *giving* word of the Lord? When the Lord makes demands of us He attaches conditions that compel us to obey or else. But when the Lord fulfills His promise to us, there are no conditions attached. He freely gives what He has promised solely because He chooses to keep His promises.

Be Strong and Courageous

With confidence in the promise of the Lord, Joshua prepares the people to enter the land God swore He would give to them. “*Be strong and courageous,*” Joshua exhorts the people; “*do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go*” (Joshua 1:9). The people promise that, just as they had obeyed Moses, so they will obey Joshua.

The story does not tell how much faith Joshua put in the promise of the people. If he knew the long story of how the people “obeyed” Moses in the wilderness, we can imagine he did not put as much stock in the people’s promise as he put in God’s promise to be faithful. We have only to think as far back as Exodus 32 and the infamous affair with the “golden calf” to recall that the human promise of obedience does not always translate into acts of obedience.

The Faith of Rahab

As the people prepare to cross over the Jordan into the Promised Land, Joshua sends two men ahead as scouts. The two men go as they have been ordered—almost. They make a little side trip along the way: “*They went, and entered the house of a prostitute whose name was Rahab, and there they spent the night*” (Joshua 2:1). That may not have been exactly what Joshua had in mind.

If the success of the mission had depended on the obedience of the two spies to their mission, then the promise of success would have gone right out the window. The authorities in Jericho had sniffed out the two men and their mission. Had it not been for Rahab, the men would have been apprehended, which would have been the end of them and their mission. But Rahab, believing in the promise of the Lord, protects the men and provides for their escape. As she explains to them,

When we heard all that the LORD had done for you our hearts melted, and there was no courage left in any of us The Lord your God is indeed God in heaven above and on earth below. Now then, since I have dealt kindly with you, swear to me by the Lord that you in turn will deal kindly with my family. —
Joshua 2:10-12

We might imagine a prostitute in Jericho would have been the last person on earth to become a convert to the truth of God, but that’s the way it worked out. The proclamation of God’s mighty deeds made a believer of her. She declared on the basis of the sermon, “*The Lord your God is indeed God in heaven above and on earth below.*” Rahab acts in obedience with the truth of what she has heard and refuses to cooperate with forces opposed to God and His promises. She believes God can be counted on to keep His promises and protects the two spies. Rahab believes that in the torrent of change and destruction God is about to bring upon their lives, the only safe refuge for her family is in the promise of God.

The wisdom of Rahab, Luther contends, is the wisdom at the heart of Christian faith. Luther said, “*To flee from and find refuge in God against God; such is the impossibility that makes theology possible.*” He may have had the story of Rahab in mind when he spoke those words. In any case, Rahab’s story in faith is our story as well.

By the end of the story it is clear that Rahab’s faith was not misplaced. When Jericho was forced to surrender to the promise of God, Joshua saw to it that Rahab’s faith in God was not disappointed. Rahab was taken into the community of faith. She and her family lived within the land of God’s promise all the rest of their days.

The Story of God’s Promise, Proclaimed and Believed

Joshua’s story of how the people of Israel crossed over from the wilderness of Shittim to a land of their own is the story of God’s promise *proclaimed* and God’s promise *believed*. That story is as much Rahab’s story as it is the story of Joshua and the people of Israel. According to the Biblical story of faith, you just never know where the truth of God may take hold of a person and to what it might lead. Who could have predicted that a prostitute in Jericho would have played such a prominent part in the story of God fulfilling His promise to the people of Israel? Once the truth of God got home to Rahab, she had no choice in the matter—she was compelled to act in obedience with what she had heard. As she explained to the spies, “*Your God is indeed God of heaven above and earth below.*” Rahab might have protested the decision of God to give Jericho over to His own people or questioned the fairness of it, but where would it have gotten her?

Joshua’s story takes us into very scary territory. We don’t often think of the land of God’s promise as a scary territory, but think of it. The story of how God kept His promise meant the end of the old Jericho and the beginning of a new Jericho, “*so that all the people of the earth may know that the hand of the Lord is mighty, and so that you may fear the Lord your God forever,*” as Joshua explains (Joshua 4:24).

Theologians who imagine they stand safely outside the Biblical story as mere bystanders sometimes object to a God who would destroy Jericho and its inhabitants to make a home for His chosen people. Precisely at the point of such an objection the Biblical story goes on the attack. It asks such theologians, “What makes you imagine you will escape the coming destruction?”

The trumpet blast of God’s truth brought down the walls of the old city that God might establish in its place a land under His Lordship. The prospect of the old life being swept away may be scary, but the end of the old is only the beginning of the new life established in the goodness of God. Rahab found

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in the Promised Land of God a new home, safe and secure in the forgiveness of God. In fact, the only people who dwell in the promise land of God are forgiven sinners. This is what Paul means when he declares, “*Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are now justified by his grace as a gift*” (Romans 3:24).

When you think of the story in that way, it is not just the story of the destruction of Jericho. It is also the story of the end of the old you and the beginning of a whole new you. The story promises to turn our lives upside down, just as it turned Rahab’s life upside down.

Passing over the Jordan from the wilderness of Shittim involves a death and a new beginning for believers. We leave behind the wilderness of Shittim with all its doubt and uncertainty, disobedience, dysfunction and infidelity. We leave that wilderness where false gods are a dime a dozen, sacred cows glittering in the sunshine but lifeless as a rock.

Passing over the Jordan into the Promised Land of God is a passage that occurs only by faith in the proclamation of the

Truth above all truths: “*Your God is indeed God of heaven above and earth below.*” The God of the Bible becomes our God, in whose promise we are destined to live all the rest of our days on this earth below and in heaven above.

Looking Ahead: The Up and Down Life in the Land of God’s Promise

Once the people of faith pass over the Jordan into the land of God’s promise, we might imagine it would have been smooth sailing. As the Book of the Judges tells us, the story of faith—even in the Promised Land—is a rather up and down story. But it is also a promising story: the proclamation of God’s truth will get ever deeper down and further in until old sinners can say with Paul,

It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me,” which is just another way of saying, “the old sinful self was crucified with Christ so that the body of sin might be destroyed But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.

— Romans 6:5ff

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Bible Study and Prayer

Each installment of our series offers suggestions for reflection and discussion.

1. According to the story of Joshua’s book, the “Spirit of wisdom” qualified him to lead the people into the land that God had promised them. Further, the story seems very clear that the “Spirit of wisdom” is the specific ability to distinguish and speak appropriately the twofold Word of the Lord, the demanding Word and the promising Word. In other words, the Spirit of wisdom is the Spirit of God, for which we pray in Article III of the *Apostles’ Creed*.
 - a. What quality or qualities does your congregation look for in selecting leaders, both pastoral and lay leaders?
 - b. How could you know whether a prospective leader has the “Spirit of wisdom”?
2. To say the least, Joshua’s story is a rough story. In the process of giving the Promised Land to Israel the former occupants were displaced and killed. Cities and

possessions were destroyed. It appears God can be very fierce in the course of executing His will. The Israelites themselves were not spared the fierceness of God. They paid a very heavy price for their disobedience. (See Joshua 7:16-26.)

3. Consider:
 - a. What do I find most comforting, most disturbing about the story of Joshua’s book?
 - b. What background knowledge would help me better hear the message of these chapters? How does my experience prepare me to hear the message of this story?
 - c. What do these chapters promise to faith?
 - d. What do these chapters demand of faith?

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