

### **Facing Our Fear**

The story is told of a spy who was captured and then sentenced to death by a general in the Persian army. This general had the strange custom of giving condemned criminals a choice between the firing squad and the big black door. As the moment for execution drew near, the spy was brought to the general, who asked, "What will it be: the firing squad or the big, black door?"

The spy hesitated for a long time. It was a difficult decision. Finally, he chose the firing squad. Moments later, shots rang out confirming his execution. The general turned to his aide and said, "They always prefer the known way to the unknown way. It is characteristic of people to be afraid of the undefined. Yet, we gave him a choice."

Curious, the aide asked, "What lies beyond the big door?"

"Freedom," the general replied. "I've known only a few brave enough to take it."

The general was right. It is human nature to be afraid of the unknown. We fear what the winds of change may bring. We fear what might happen. We fear what might not happen. Even if our fears aren't firmly rooted in reality, they sure seem real to us. It's like three-year-old Brian, who was convinced on Halloween that ghosts were in his room. His mother tried to reassure him, "It's all in your head; now go to sleep." Before she even got down the stairs, Brian cried out again, "Mom, the ghosts have left my and are running around my room."

Fear in small doses is a good thing. It sharpens our focus. It helps us think things all the way through. It motivates to lean on others. It encourages us to take calculated risks, and grow beyond our present limits. And spiritually, it inspires us to put our trust in God.

We need rational fear in our lives. It's how we respond to real imminent threats in our lives. A bad performance review might inspire you to up your game at work. You see someone driving dangerously on 44, and you back off a little and let them go. A visit to the doctor challenges you to make some needed lifestyle changes. That's healthy. That's good. We need that.

We also have deeper, primal fears. These are natural fears that have helped keep people alive for thousands of years on this planet. There's a healthy, primal fear of snakes or spiders or heights. Teresa and I were out walking one day, and she almost stepped on a copper head. When I'm working in a dark, confined space, I give a thorough look for any brown recluse spiders. When I go hiking, I don't get too close to the edge. Those are healthy responses.

But in large doses, or uncontrolled, fear can be very debilitating. It clouds our vision. People will spend days on the road to avoid hours on a plane. People will trudge up flight after flight of stairs, to avoid spending a minute in the elevator. They won't take a walk in the woods, for fear they might make the acquaintance of a spider. They keep their marriage shackled in mediocrity, because they are afraid of having a difficult conversation. Churches fail to

respond to the great commission because they fear change.

This kind of fear shows itself in many ways. You might suffer from panic attacks, a sudden episode of intense fear. I know one person who can't drive over bridges, or any steep embankment with guardrails. It runs a very high probability of causing a panic attack. Because of this their independent life is confined to a few miles around their house.

Some of us have certain phobias. We have an extreme terror, agitation or aversion to something. It might be heights, planes, snakes, elevators, spiders, or public speaking. Your knees shake, your palms sweat, your chest tightens, and you will do anything to avoid that situation. Sometimes these fears are completely irrational, other times they are rooted in a traumatic experience.

Like all of our other feelings, fear is a God-given emotion that serves a very legitimate purpose in our lives. In a proper context, fear is healthy and helpful. But when fear overflows outside of those boundaries, fear can be destructive. Even if you never have a panic attack in your life. Even if you don't have a single irrational phobia, fear can still harm us at a more basic spiritual level. Fear takes our eyes off of God and focuses our attention on our circumstances. We're afraid of not being able to control our circumstances instead of trusting in the God who controls all things.

Again, when we turn to God's word, we find that we are not alone. Last week we talked about Elijah who courageously faced down 850 false prophets, but was afraid of one woman— the wicked queen Jezebel. We read in 1 Kings 19:3, "*Elijah was afraid and ran for his life.*" Moses found himself with the Red Sea in front of him and Pharaoh's army behind him. Exodus 14:10 says the Israelites "*were terrified and cried out to the Lord.*" Peter and the other Apostles faced the very same religious leaders and the very same crowds that crucified Jesus. Did they all have reasons to fear? Without a doubt. Did they have reason to be strong and courageous? They had faith in an almighty God who had promised to never leave them or forsake them.

They all have stood where we stand, and in faith they overcame their fear and experienced what only God could do. This morning I want us to turn to Joshua 1. Joshua and the nation of Israel are standing on the edge of the Promised Land. This story is one of the most incredible accounts of faith in the face of fear. God's message to Joshua and Israel many centuries ago might just be the encouragement you need this morning.

What is that message? Simply this- Be strong and courageous. Be strong and courageous. Be strong and courageous. Three times God tells them, "be strong and courageous."

### 1. Reasons for Fear

Did they have reason to be afraid? Hehehe. Why do you think God had to tell Joshua three

times to be strong and courageous? Well, I can think of three reasons they had to fear. These are three things that can fill us with fear too.

### **1. The Fear of Circumstances**

The first thing that could have filled Joshua and the children of Israel with fear is present circumstances. The children of Israel certainly had circumstances to make them fear. Turn in your Bibles to Joshua 1. Look at the very first verse. *“After the death of Moses...”* Did they ever have reason to fear?

Those of you who are old enough to remember, will never forget the day Kennedy got shot. You can remember the details of that day. You remember where you were, and what you were doing. Those of us who are younger will have permanently etched in our minds where we were and what we were doing when the events of 9-11 took place. We all remember the day the world shut down in March of 2020. There is something about such events that touch us to the very core of our being. For all that those events were for us, the loss of Moses was many times greater for the people of Israel.

Israel had just lost their leader of more than 40 years. The man that God used to lead them out of captivity in Egypt. The man before whom the Red Sea parted. The man through whom God had performed amazing miracle after amazing miracle. The man who had carried the law of God down from Mt. Sinai. For forty years, he had been their leader in religious, domestic, judicial, military and civic life. Moses was the only leader they had ever known. For them, they hadn't just lost a leader, they had lost a way of life. And now they found themselves on the edge of the Promised Land that they had been pursuing for four decades, and they would have to conquer it without Moses. Their present circumstances could certainly fill them with fear, just as they do with us.

Present circumstances can also fill us with fear. It can be circumstances at work, at school, at home, with your friends or family. It doesn't matter. Satan tries to take our eyes off our Lord and he says, “You can't really do that, look at this circumstance here and did you see what happened there? What makes you think you go there when you have all these things going on here?”

### **2. We Fear Our Past**

A second thing we fear is our past. Based on their track record over the last 40 years Joshua and the Israelites had every reason to believe they would fail to take the Promised Land. In the last four decades they had failed again and again and again. They doubted God. They turned to idols they made with their own hands. They wanted to go back to Egypt. They grumbled and complained. They were disobedient and rebelled.

There was absolutely nothing in Israel's resume to make Joshua think this was a group of

people who could accomplish the task before them. I'm sure Satan tried to bring to Joshua's mind every one of those failures. I'm sure he was working overtime to remind each one of the Israelites of all the reasons they couldn't do it.

One of the quickest ways for us to start fearing the future is we start dwelling in the past. We remember the mistakes and failures of previous efforts, and Satan gets us to thinking we can't do it this time. Friends, it is never God's desire to let our past determine the horizon of our future. He's in the business of turning hookers into heroes of faith, shepherds into kings, slaves into powerful diplomats, criminals into missionaries, and fishermen into Apostles. The past should never become the measure of your future.

### 3. We Fear Ourselves

Sometimes, the thing we fear the most is our self. We doubt our own ability. We question our own faithfulness. We are unsure of our own motivation. This certainly could have been the case with Joshua. It doesn't talk about it in our present text, but before this moment there is one other occasion when Joshua took a leading role in Israel's history.

It was only two years after they had left Egypt. Israel had spent most of that time encamped around Sinai receiving the Law from God. He led them all the way to the edge of the Promised Land and they were ready to take it. Joshua was among 12 spies sent to go and explore the land. Here's the report most of the men had when they got back.

Num 13:31-33

*31 But the men who had gone up with him said, "We can't attack those people; they are stronger than we are." 32 And they spread among the Israelites a bad report about the land they had explored. They said, "The land we explored devours those living in it. All the people we saw there are of great size. We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them."*

This had a strong impact on the people. Listen to their response:

Num 14:1-4

*14:1 That night all the people of the community raised their voices and wept aloud. 2 All the Israelites grumbled against Moses and Aaron, and the whole assembly said to them, "If only we had died in Egypt! Or in this desert! 3 Why is the LORD bringing us to this land only to let us fall by the sword? Our wives and children will be taken as plunder. Wouldn't it be better for us to go back to Egypt?" 4 And they said to each other, "We should choose a leader and go back to Egypt."*

Only Joshua and one other spy, a guy by the name of Caleb believed God could lead them to take the land. They tried to convince everyone that they should go ahead and take the land. They pleaded fervently with the people to trust in God. How effective were their efforts? Listen to verse 10, *"the whole assembly talked about stoning them."* When it came to personal leadership ability, Joshua didn't have much reason to think he could do it. He had every reason

to doubt himself.

## **II. Reasons For Strength and Courage**

So in the face of these three fears; fear of our circumstances, fear of our past, and fear of ourselves, God tells Joshua three times, *“Be strong and courageous.”* And every time God tells him, *“be strong and courageous,”* God gives Joshua a reason to be strong and courageous.

### **1. The Strength and Courage of Godly Leadership**

Listen to what God tells Joshua in verse 6, *“Be strong and courageous, because you will lead these people to inherit the land I swore to their forefathers to give them.”* Joshua needed to lead these people. He had a job to do. He didn't have time to sit around and feel sorry for himself.

God said, *“you will lead.”* That seemed impossible at the time. How is it possible? Not because of what Joshua does. The text is not full of “you will, you will, you will.” It is possible because of what God will do. Look at the opening verses. Multiple times God says what He will do. *“I am, I will give, I promised, I will be with you, I will never leave you, I swore.”* Joshua could lead because He trusted in God. As long as Joshua walked with God He could lead the people.

The same is true of us. We can do anything God has called us to do as long as we trust in him. You don't have to be a preacher like me, or one of the elders. As long as you walk with God, as long as you trust in Him, you can do what you could not do on your own. I had a friend in Virginia named Gene. Gene and his wife Shelby visited here with us last year as they were on an RV trip. There was something Gene was fond of saying, *“We need a bigger basket for God.”* We keep putting God in a box, a box whose size is defined by our circumstances, our past, and our abilities. But God is not calling us to the task with our box, but with His. Heaven makes all the difference in the world.

### **2. The Strength and Courage of Being a People of the Word**

Again God tells Joshua, *“be strong and courageous.”* And He gives him another reason. He can move boldly into the future as long as he is a man of God's Word. Listen:

Josh 1:7-9

*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. 8 Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; 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.*

We can only move confidently into the future if we are firmly grounded in God's word. It takes deep spiritual roots. Two sermons a month doesn't cut it; it takes a heart and mind interwoven with God's word. Look at the things that Joshua is to do with God's word. He is to

obey it, stick to it, hold on to it, meditate on it, and do it. He is to do all this consistently— night and day. He is to do it completely. He can't pick and choose the parts he likes, but he is to do everything written in it.

### 3. The Strength and Courage of Being Prepared

A third time God says, *"be strong and courageous."* I want you to notice how Joshua responds.

Josh 1:9-11

*Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go."*

*10 So Joshua ordered the officers of the people: 11 "Go through the camp and tell the people, 'Get your supplies 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.'*

If anyone had reason to be afraid, it was Joshua and the children of Israel, but God tells them not to be discouraged. Discouragement destroys vision. It stifles growth. It makes us motionless and useless. Fear immobilizes a church. It is not about what we can do. It is about what God can do. *"For the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go."*

Instead of being discouraged by present circumstances, the children of Israel were confidently preparing for tomorrow. They were to be people of vision, and to take practical steps in the present for what seemed to be practically impossible in the future. Faith over fear isn't wishful thinking with a religious polish. It's not mere pie in the sky thinking.

Faith over fear is practical. It's realistic. It's every day. Here's the people gathering supplies, getting everything lined up and organized. Israel didn't march into the Promised Land halfcocked. They went in prepared.

It's not really right for us to ask God to help us overcome our fear when we're not willing to take any practical steps to address it ourselves. What practical steps are you willing to take. What changes are you willing to make. Faith in God and your personal responsibility in this work hand in hand.

Trusting in God, Joshua has his people start making preparations for taking the land, even though they could not see with earthly vision how they could do it. How could they, a vagabond group of runaway slaves ever conquer a whole land filled with mighty armies and heavily fortified walled cities? The way could only be seen with spiritual vision.

We also see that it takes everybody working together. It wasn't only Joshua by himself, but it was all the people. It will take a team effort; all of us working together to make it a reality. That's how it works as a family. That's how it works as a team at work. That's how it works as a church. We all have to work together. It's much easier to walk a dark, scary path if you're not

walking alone.

**Conclusion:**

A child had to walk each evening past a dark, spooky house. Some adult friends tried to give him courage. One handed him a good-luck charm to ward off the ghosts. Another installed a light at a particularly dark corner near the house. A third took a more spiritual approach, saying, "It's sinful to be afraid. Trust God and be brave!" It was good advice, but not much help. Then one friend said with compassion, "I know what it is to be afraid. I'll walk with you past the house." Instantly the child's fears were gone.

This was what God did for Joshua. Joshua faced the fearful task of leading a group of nomads against the trained armies of established kingdoms. That was enough to make even the bravest man tremble. But God did more than give Joshua a battle plan or a pep talk; He reassured him, saying, *"I will be with you wherever you go."*

God does not promise He will not lead us into fearful situations. In fact, He may lead us into the most terrifying situations we can imagine. But He does not send us alone.

He gives us the one thing that will help us move boldly into the future. He gives us Himself