

## “The Preparation of a Servant”

*Joshua 1:1-5; Various passages from Numbers*

How would *you* liked to have been the one to fill the shoes of Moses?

For forty years, Moses had been the only leader the Hebrew people had known. He had brought them out of Egypt’s slavery, and had led them through trial and heartache in the wilderness. Keeping his eyes on the Lord God, Moses led those people toward the land of Canaan which had been given to them as their inheritance. But because of his own personal sin, Moses was not allowed to actually enter Canaan. That task would be given to another. Someone else would lead the Hebrew people into that strange land. That person would have to quickly gain the confidence and trust of all those people, enough to lead them in battle, something Moses had never done. How do you think *you* would fit into that role?

Even the most beloved leaders die. Even the ones we consider to be indispensable sooner or later pass on to the other side of eternity. But none of us is indispensable; neither was Moses, and the time came when even he died. When he breathed his last, God raised up another, whose name was Joshua, to lead the people of God into places they had never been before. He was a great and godly man who was to lead God’s people in some of the most difficult, yet most glorious, days in their history. Even his name ought to make us sit up and take notice: the name “Joshua” is the Hebrew equivalent of the name “Jesus,” which means “Yahweh is salvation.”

Joshua became a great and powerful leader, in both a military and a spiritual sense. Over and over he demonstrated genius in devising strategy for the battlefield. He was a man who listened carefully *to* God, then spoke boldly and decisively *for* God.

Was Joshua merely the most logical choice to succeed Moses? God didn’t just pull him out of the ranks at random. God had already chosen him for that important task, and had been preparing him for years. As a slave in Egypt, Joshua saw the mighty plagues by which God delivered Israel. How thrilling it must have been to have crossed through the Red Sea on dry ground! He was one of the twelve men sent to spy out the land of Canaan, and one of only two who had brought back a good report. He had been with Moses on the mountain when the Ten Commandments were given! All of those things contributed to make Joshua the servant that he was.

But there were some other things in his life that helped to prepare Joshua for the monumental challenge of leading the people into, conquering and possessing Canaan. God had prepared Joshua for the task long before Moses died. The exciting thing is that God works in our lives to prepare us for the jobs He gives to us! Never does God command us to do something without preparing and equipping us to do it. It follows that we cannot properly serve the Lord until we have experienced the working of God in our lives, preparing us for true servanthood.

As we look back at the life of Joshua as it is recorded in the book of Numbers, it becomes sparkling clear that there were certain characteristics in Joshua's life which indicated that he was at last prepared to serve God in leading His people. Let's compare ourselves and the task we have been called to in serving the Lord and this church, with the preparation we have allowed God to work in our lives. When are we prepared to most effectively serve God?

## **1 When we have learned to take orders, Numbers 11:28**

One of the things which stands out most about Joshua is that for about forty years he was the servant of Moses. He was Moses' aide and constant companion. Look in Numbers 11:28; there Joshua is describe as "the servant of Moses." Some of the versions translate the Hebrew language to mean that Joshua "had been Moses' aide since youth." You see, for a long time, Joshua had been learning to take orders.

When Joshua had been on that mountain with Moses when God gave the Ten Commandments, he was not there as Moses' friend, though surely they must have developed a deep, abiding friendship. Joshua was there primarily as Moses' servant, ready to do whatever Moses needed done. Moses would have selected this young man after much prayer, because he needed someone who could actually minister to his physical and spiritual needs.

Moses needed someone on whom he could depend, someone he could trust to carry out his orders without hesitation. When we read the story of the wanderings of the Hebrew people in the wilderness, and how they bitterly complained all the way through, we become aware of the fact that there were very few men who had learned to take orders. Everyone wanted to lead; very few were willing to follow.

For us to say that Joshua had learned to take orders in no way implies that he was weak-willed, with no personality or determination of his own. There were several

times Joshua demonstrated initiative and real character. Yet he had been able to kill his personal pride in order to serve a man known as the servant of the Lord.

Learning to take orders and serve others is an indispensable prerequisite to leadership, and not just in the church. You look in the business world. Those who have become successful business men and women are those who at one time early in their lives learned to follow the orders of a superior. It is true in the church, as well: too many of us are willing to lead before we've learned to follow! Too many of us attempt to dictate to others before we have learned to be servants who follow orders.

Could it be that this is what Jesus meant when He said that the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many (Matthew 20:28)? Being willing to be a servant before we can lead is the principle Jesus was teaching when He took the posture of a servant and washed the disciples' feet. And He told us that we should have the same spirit of servanthood if we are going to effectively lead others: *"Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all"* (Mark 10:43-44).

The Apostle Paul expressed it this way: *"Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness"* (Philippians 2:5-7).

## **2** When our faith in God's promises leads to courage, Numbers 14:6-10

Shortly after the Hebrew people escaped from Egypt, the Lord told Moses to send twelve men to explore the land of Canaan. When the twelve men returned, ten of the men said, "Yes, it is a beautiful, fruitful place, but the people who live there are like giants. We are like grasshoppers compared to them."

Two of the spies, Joshua and Caleb, spoke to the people in Numbers 14, and said, *"The land we pass through and explored is exceedingly good. If the Lord is pleased with us, he will lead us into that land, a land flowing with milk and honey, and will give it to us."* Look in verse ten to see how the people reacted to this faithful witness: *"But the whole assembly talked about stoning them."*

Joshua's faith had led him to believe God, even if it meant standing alone against all the children of Israel. At that moment, his faith would have been worthless if it had not led him to take a stand based on personal conviction and faith in the power of God.

Our God is a God who often leads His people into unfamiliar territory. From the day God commanded Noah to build an ark, He has been leading His people into places they've never been. No one even knew what rain *was* when Noah obeyed the Lord. When God sent Abram out from his father's home, He was leading His people into a land where they had never been. When the Hebrew people crossed through the Red Sea, with the waters thundering all around them, they were experiencing something totally unknown to human beings at that time. Through every experience there in the wilderness, God was showing His people something else about Himself that they had not known, leading them into a deeper experience with the Lord God. Now it was time for God to lead this particular generation into a land completely unknown to them.

When you turn to the New Testament, you find this same God still leading His people into places they'd never been, into things they'd never heard or felt or thought or seen. No one had ever seen water turned into wine, or people healed of blindness, lameness, leprosy, deafness, paralysis or whatever else was wrong with them.

No one had ever heard anyone say "I am the Bread of life," or "I am the Light of the World." Before Jesus came to lead the people of God into a new experience, no one had ever heard of "abundant life," or redemption through a Roman cross. It was totally new when the Holy Spirit descended on the 120 disciples at Pentecost.

And the God of the Scriptures continues to lead His people in "paths they have not known." Our experience of God is too narrow and limited if we are not willing to follow Him into all He has in store for us in the future! It may involve doing things we've never done before, in ways previously unknown to us. It may be uncomfortable to some of us, especially if we've settled down into a spiritual life of ease and indolence.

It's important to get this truth: you don't move into the future by trying to duplicate the past. The past is definitely important, but it has always and always been true from the beginning of God's dealings with all of mankind, that when He leads, He always leads into the future. He never leads us into the past.

And that takes faith in God's promises, and it takes courage.

But one thing is certain: if we are going to serve the Lord, then we have no choice but to follow Him into unknown territory, because that's where He's been leading His people since Genesis!

God was preparing Joshua for the task of eventually leading the entire nation of Israel into the land He had promised to give them. Those who are willing to step out from the ranks of the ordinary and follow the Lord, even if they don't know where He's leading—even if they can't see all the steps at one time—those are the people God will use to lead the rest of His people.

### **3 When our lives are fully devoted to the Lord, Numbers 14:30; 32:11-12**

Because of the rebellion of the people of Israel, who refused to believe God and would not enter Canaan, the anger of God was kindled. He told Moses, *“How long will this wicked community grumble against me? I have heard the complaints of these grumbling Israelites....Not one of you will enter the land I swore with uplifted hand to make your home, except Caleb...and Joshua”* (Numbers 14:27, 30).

Years later, when all those who had rebelled had died, and their children were just about to enter Canaan, Moses reminded the people of what God had said: *“Because they have not followed me wholeheartedly, not one of the men twenty years old or more who came up out of Egypt will see the land I promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—not one except Caleb son of Jephunneh and Joshua son of Nun, for they followed the Lord wholeheartedly”* (Numbers 32:11-12).

It is inconceivable that God would choose anyone to lead His people into Canaan who did not serve Him wholeheartedly. And of all those people, there were only two who met that qualification: Caleb and Joshua. God had other plans for Caleb, but Joshua was the one God had chosen and was preparing to lead His people in conquest of Canaan. Not just anyone could do this.

The task was great, and would require much more commitment to the Lord God than the average person was willing to give. There was no room or time for half-hearted commitment, limp-wristed courage, or weak-kneed determination. It was going to take Joshua's entire life in this effort of leading them into the Promised Land.

Is our task any less? Isn't our Canaan occupied by a fierce enemy as well? Isn't it going to require of us exactly what it required of Joshua? Can we afford to offer to God anything less than our entire lives? Jesus did not half die! And so our commitment in serving Him should not be half, either! When our lives become fully devoted to the Lord, then, and only then, will we be ready to lead others.

## **4** When we have been filled with the Spirit of God, Numbers 27:12-18

God took Moses up on a mountain range and showed him the land He had given to the Israelites. God said to him, "After you have seen it, Moses, you're going to die. Because of your sin, you will not lead My people into that land." With that true spirit of a servant and compassionate leader, Moses said to the Lord in verse 16, "*May the Lord, the God of the spirits of all mankind, appoint a man over this community to go out and come in before them, one who will lead them out and bring them in, so the Lord's people will not be like sheep without a shepherd.*"

And God said to Moses, "I have just the man in mind. In fact, I've been getting him ready for forty years, Moses. Take Joshua, son of Nun, a man *in whom is the Spirit*, and lay your hand on him" (v. 18). What kind of spirit do you suppose that was? Was it a spirit of success, or victory or anything else so positive? No! It was nothing but the Spirit of God! Being filled with the Spirit of God is absolutely necessary, positively essential for doing any great work of God. That's why, before Jesus ascended to heaven, He told His disciples: "*Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised.*" He made it clear that He was talking about the *Holy Spirit*.

Then just before He left, He told them, "*But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth*" (Acts 1:4, 8). Before this handful of timid, frightened, confused disciples could even begin to accomplish the great task Jesus had given them to take the Gospel into all the world, they had to be filled with the Spirit of God.

Why do we think we can get by with less than that? Why do we rely so much more on our own personal characteristics and power than upon the infilling of the Holy Spirit? Those personal strengths and skills are fine, and God can and does use them, but the primary requirement is that we be filled with the Spirit of God. Those



of us who desire to serve this church, and who desire to serve other people, must first come to the place in our lives where we admit before God and before all others that we are empty without God.

God had been preparing Joshua to lead the people into Canaan. I honestly and sincerely believe that God is preparing us today to lead us into a wonderful future, if we will do all He commands. Never does God command us to do something without preparing and equipping us to do it. If you have not learned to take orders, then there's no way you will take orders from God. Sometimes we are afraid to follow God into unknown territory; how in the world can we lead this church to follow God if our faith in God's promises does not lead us to courage?

We need to be extremely careful to see that our entire lives are fully devoted to the Lord. And we need to draw aside from the hustle and bustle to wait for the infilling of the Holy Spirit of God for the tasks He places before us.

So while I believe the message today applies to everyone, it most definitely focuses on those in leadership positions. If you lead this church, or if you feel God is preparing you for a future leadership role in His Kingdom, then the key to being a successful leader is to learn to be a servant:

**Learn to take orders.**

**Allow your faith in God's promises to lead you to courage.**

**Fully devote your entire life to the Lord.**

**Wait for the filling of the Holy Spirit.**

We don't have to worry about filling the shoes of Moses. But we are called to serve the Lord God, nevertheless. Are you willing to give what it takes?