

Courageous Followers of Christ

Intro:

Remember the movie “Braveheart”? Mel Gibson plays the part of William Wallace and there’s that famous scene where he is trying to instill courage in the hearts of his army. In his book “The Barbarian Way,” Erwin McManus talks about another Scottish hero who was a contemporary of William Wallace.

Robert the Bruce was the Scottish noble whose character is most remembered for betraying William Wallace, but he later rose up to lead Scotland to freedom after Wallace’s execution...

He died in 1329 at the age of 54. Shortly before his death, Robert the Bruce requested that his heart be removed from his body and taken on crusade by a worthy knight. James Douglas, one of his closest friends, was at his bedside and took on the responsibility. The heart of Robert the Bruce was embalmed and placed in a small container that Douglas carried around his neck. In every battle that Douglas fought, he literally carried the heart of his king pressed against his chest.

In the early spring of 1330, Douglas sailed from Scotland to Granada, Spain, and engaged in a campaign against the Moors. In an ill-fated battle, Douglas found himself surrounded, and in this situation death was both certain and imminent. In that moment Douglas reached for the heart strapped around his neck, flung the heart into the enemy’s midst, and cried out, “Fight for the heart of your king!” One historian quoted Douglas as shouting, “Forward, brave heart, as ever thou were wont to do, and Douglas will follow his king’s heart or die!” The motto of the Douglas clan to which the present duke belongs is even to this day simply, “Forward.”

Although anyone who understands the heart of God knows that the Crusades were a tragic lesson in missing the point, the power of this story awakens within me a primal longing that I am convinced waits to be unleashed within everyone who is a follower of Jesus Christ. To belong to God is to belong to His heart. If we have responded to the call of Jesus to leave everything and follow Him, then there is a voice within us crying out, “Fight for the heart of your King!”

Yet Christianity over the past two thousand years has moved from a tribe of renegades to a religion of conformists. Those who choose to follow Jesus become participants in an insurrection. To claim we believe is simply not enough. The call of Jesus is one that demands action. Jesus began His public ministry with a simple invitation: “Come, follow me.” His closing instructions to His disciples can be summarized in one word, “Go!” A quick survey of the modern church would lead you to believe His invitation was “Come, and listen,” and His closing mandate would be summarized in the one word “No!” The tribe of Jesus, above all people, should rightly carry the banner, “Forward.”
(“The Barbarian Way,” p. 3-5)

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This morning, we are beginning a 4-part series called “Courageous.” It’s a series that will call all of us to become more courageous followers of Christ.

Across this country, churches are in decline. Attendance is dropping and the church is having less and less impact on the surrounding culture. Families are crumbling, the divorce rate is as high or higher inside the Church as it is outside. I want you to take a look at this video that was created to address church planters--men who are about to start brand new congregations. It raises the tension that I believe we need to feel this morning--Where are the courageous followers of Christ?

Video - “Church Planter” by Darrin Patrick

What does it mean to be a courageous follower of Christ? What does it look like? What characteristics does a courageous follower of Christ embody? If you have your Bible, turn with me to Joshua chapter 1.

As we look at this passage, it is important to understand the context of what has happened in the life of God’s people Israel. In Genesis chapter 12, God calls a man named Abram to leave his home country and settle into an unknown land where God promises to make of him a great nation that will bless all people on earth. This, of course, is a reference to Jesus the Messiah who would come as Abraham’s seed. Then, in Genesis 15, God formally establishes a covenant with Abram and reveals to him in verse 13 that his descendants would be “strangers in a country not their own” and that they would be “enslaved and mistreated there” for four hundred years. And in Genesis 17, God establishes circumcision as the sign of this covenant.

God renews the covenant with Abraham’s grandson, Jacob, in Genesis 28 as Jacob dreams of a stairway that reached to the heavens. Due to a famine, Abraham’s descendants end up in Egypt where they spent 400 years in slavery, just as God had foretold. Then, God raised up Moses to deliver His people from the land of Egypt and to bring them back to their land. However, because of fear and disbelief, they chose not to obey God’s command to enter the land. After wandering in the desert for 40 years, and after every member of that disbelieving generation had died including Moses their leader, Joshua becomes the new leader of God’s people. That is the context of Joshua chapter 1. (**Read Joshua 1:1-9**).

Pray

This is a very encouraging passage. In fact, depending on your translation, it is the only place in the Bible where the word “success” is used. Let’s look at some of the encouraging aspects of this passage. God tells Joshua...

1. “I will give you every place you set your foot...” (v. 3)
2. “No one will be able to stand against you all the days of your life.” (v. 5)
3. “...I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you.” (v. 5)

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4. "...you will lead these people to inherit the land..." (v. 6)
5. "...you will be prosperous and successful." (v. 8)
6. "...the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go." (v. 9)

These are all...

I. The promises God gives to Joshua. Let's break them down.

A. First, God promises an inheritance

Verse 6 - "Be strong and courageous, because you will lead these people to inherit the land I swore to their ancestors to give them."

Israel is standing on the brink of the fulfillment of their dream of entering the Promised Land--the land flowing with milk and honey. They had been here before and blown it and it resulted in the loss of 40 years and an entire generation. And God promises to give them every place they set their foot! What an inheritance!

B. Next, God promised victory

Verse 5 - "No one will be able to stand against you all the days of your life."

Verse 8 - "You will be prosperous and successful."

Wouldn't you like to have these promises--that nothing you will ever face will defeat you and that you will be prosperous and successful? What would you set out to do if you knew that you could not fail? What an encouragement that must have been to Joshua! He had seen the giants in the land. He was one of the 12 spies that had gone into the land, but he and Caleb were the only two spies who believed that God could give them the land. And they were the only ones left of their generation who were still alive.

C. God also promised Joshua His presence

Verse 5 - "As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you."

Verse 9 - "Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go."

It must have been very reassuring for Joshua to hear that God would be with him just as He had been with Moses. He had seen Moses go up on Mt. Sinai to meet face to face with God. He had seen Moses' face glow after God let Moses see His backside. And now God was going to be with him! What an incredible promise!

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But, these promises had conditions. It's important to realize that while God's love for us is unconditional, His promises always have conditions! In these same 9 verses where God gives such incredible promises, He also gives Joshua some instructions:

1. "...cross the Jordan River..." (v. 2)
2. "Be strong and courageous..." (v. 6)
3. "Be strong and very courageous..." (v. 7)
4. "Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you..." (v. 7)
5. "Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night..." (v. 8)
6. "Be strong and courageous." (v. 9)

You could sum up...

II. The commands God gives to Joshua this way...

A. First, he gave Joshua a task to fulfill

Verse 2 - "Moses my servant is dead. Now then, you and all these people, get ready to cross the Jordan River into the land I am about to give to them--to the Israelites."

Verse 6 - "Be strong and courageous, because you will lead these people to inherit the land I swore to their ancestors to give them."

I referred to Genesis 15 earlier. Turn there with me now. (**Read Genesis 15:13-16**). Four generations--some 500 or so years--after God promised this land to Abraham and his descendants, Joshua was now the man who was responsible for leading Israel into the Promised Land.

As an aside, notice the phrase in verse 16 -- "for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure." In Deuteronomy 20:16-18, God instructs His people to destroy every living inhabitant of the land. Doesn't that seem harsh?

Did your mom or dad ever say, "I've had it up to here!"? It's interesting to see God's mercy toward the Amorites in Genesis 15:16 in that their sin had not yet reached its full measure. He allowed them to continue in their detestable practices for another 500 or so years before He sent His people in and gave them the command to wipe out everything that lived.

B. Next, God commanded Joshua to be courageous. In fact, God told Joshua 3 times to be strong and courageous in verse 6, 7 & 9. And then in verse 18, the people tell him to be strong and courageous! When God says something, we should pay attention! But, when God says something 3 or 4 times, He

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must really mean it! Obviously, there was plenty of reason for Joshua to chicken out!

- C. Then, Joshua was to obey God if he wanted the promises come true.

Verse 2 - "...you and all these people, get ready to cross the Jordan River into the land I am about to give to them..."

God's preferred future for His people would never come about until they obeyed God and crossed the Jordan River to take possession of the land. Moses had come so close, but had fallen short. But that's not all Joshua was to obey...

- D. God told Joshua to know God's Word and do what it says.

Verse 7 - "Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left..."

Verse 8 - "Keep this Book of the Law law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it."

It wasn't enough for Joshua to be familiar with God's word. God told him to meditate on it day and night, and, more importantly, to do what it says!

I'm reminded of the story about the church that hired a new preacher. On his first Sunday, he got up and preached an incredible message. In fact, several people commented that it was one of the best messages they had ever heard. The next week, the preacher got up and preached the exact same message word for word. The people whispered and laughed among themselves but no one said anything to him. He had obviously made some sort of a rookie mistake or something. The third week, he preached the exact same message again--word for word. Well, it was decided that the chairman of the deacons would meet with the young pastor. In the meeting, the chairman said, "Young man, do you realize that you have preached same message three weeks in a row?" The young preacher replied, "Yes, and I'm going to keep preaching it until someone acts on it!"

When God established His covenant law with Moses and the people. They were commanded to keep the law (the 10 commandments) as conditions for the covenant. We see these conditions in Leviticus 26. Turn with me there. In my Bible, the heading above Chapter 26 verse 1 reads "Reward for Obedience" and the heading above verse 14 says "Punishment for Disobedience." (**Read excerpts of Leviticus 26**).

Verses 1-13 describe God's preferred future for His people. It lists all of the benefits and blessings they could expect if they obeyed God. Sadly, verses 14-45 describe what actually happened to Israel because, as we know, they disobeyed God. And they suffered the consequences for their disobedience.

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So we see that God takes the commands He gives very serious. And, although God has gives promises, they are always conditional upon us obeying His commands.

Application

To borrow a phrase from my friend Jonathan Falwell as he preached this passage right after his father's death in May of 2005-- "We are all Joshua." Did you know that God has promised the same things to us? These same promises appear in the NT as well.

1. He has promised us an inheritance. I guess you could say it's our Promised Land.

1 Peter 1:3-4 - "In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade—kept in heaven for you..."

1 Corinthians 2:9 - "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him."

2. He has promised us victory.

Romans 8:31b - "If God is for us, who can be against us?"

Romans 8:37 - "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us."

3. He has promised us His presence.

1 Corinthians 6:19a - "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?"

Matthew 28:20b - "And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

But, just like the promises God gave to Joshua, ours have conditions as well. In general God's promises only apply to those who have come to know Jesus as their Forgiver and Leader. If you haven't made that decision yet, that is where you must start. But for those who have put their faith and trust in Jesus, God has given us the same commands He gave Joshua.

1. He has given us a task to fulfill. It's called The Great Commission.

Matthew 28:19-20 - "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you."

If we are not making disciples of all nations, we cannot expect God to fulfill the promises He's given us in His Word. But guess what folks, we're not even making disciples of Corbin, let alone all nations!

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In fact, our churches are filled with people who claim the name of Christ, yet they are having no greater impact for the Kingdom of God than before their “conversion.” If that’s you, there’s reason to doubt your salvation.

And yet these same Christians will rise up in arms to defend certain traditions in the church as if they were the Gospel itself. For instance, a program like Sunday evening worship services or maybe a favorite style of music--things that are not mandated anywhere in Scripture. Meanwhile, the Great Commission is being ignored in our churches and it doesn’t seem to bother us at all! It’s time to stop spending so much time in the comfort of our cushy facilities consuming religious programs and start building intentional relationships with people who are far from God that He has placed us in the middle of. As David Platt says in his new book “Radical Together”:

We woke up and said to ourselves, “Why are we trying to organize how and where and when our people minister? God has already given them opportunities for ministry where they live and work and play.” So we decided to stop planning, creating, and managing outreach programs and to start unleashing people to maximize the ministry opportunities God had already planned and created for them... And now our leadership team understands that it’s good when people are so involved in ministry where they live that they don’t have time to participate in the programs we create.

Courageous followers of Christ fully engage in the task that Jesus set before us instead of just showing up at church services 3 times a week.

2. Next, God commands us to be strong and courageous.

Ephesians 6:10-17 - “Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.”

Courageous followers of Christ realize that they don’t have any strength. It is only in the Lord and in His mighty power where strength is found.

3. He commands us to obey His commands.

John 14:15 - “If you love me, you will obey what I command.”

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Luke 10:27 - "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind" ; and, "Love your neighbor as yourself." (The Great Commandment)

The Great Commission! (Matthew 28:19-20)

Courageous followers of Christ take seriously the Great Commandment--to love God with everything we are--and the Great Commission--to spread His fame to the ends of the earth.

4. He commands us to study His Word and do what it says.

2 Timothy 3:16-17 - "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."

James 1:22 - "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says."

I took Algebra 1 & 2 and other math classes, but since I don't algebra very often, I've forgotten much of what I learned. But, when it comes enharmonic equivalents or a harmonic minor scale, I know what I'm talking about because I use that knowledge just about every day and I put that knowledge into practice. It's the same way with Scripture.

Courageous followers of Christ know what they believe and why they believe it because they have studied God's Word and they put it into practice. Many of you have taken up the Radical Challenge to read through the Bible this year. How are you doing? More importantly, what are you doing with what you have read?

We are all Joshua. We have all been given a task to complete. What are you doing to carry out the Great Commission? What impact are you having for the Kingdom of God? Who are you pouring your life into?

Are you walking in obedience to Christ? What has God told you to do that you still haven't done? For some it might be to go public with your faith by being baptized. For others it might be to partner formally in ministry with this church by becoming a member. What about your finances? Are you obeying God when it comes to giving back to Him? Maybe He told you to go on one of the mission trips this past summer but you came up with excuse after excuse--like Moses. What about that neighbor, friend or co-worker you still haven't engaged in a spiritual conversation?

Are you studying His Word, but more importantly, doing what it says? Do you really know what you believe and why you believe it? We absorb a lot of sermons and Bible studies, but are we being changed by it? What happens to all the small group lessons and messages you hear on Sunday? Have they made a difference in your life?

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Men, where do you need to “man up” and show some courage? How about in your home? Are you being the spiritual leader, the protector and the provider that God wants you to be in your home for your wife and your kids? Where are the men who will put down the game controllers and pick up their Bibles instead? Immanuel is like most churches--we have a vacuum of male leadership. We need our older men to be courageous and begin to pour into some of the younger men in our church. The future of this church depends on it!

Students, school starts tomorrow. This year, will you have the courage stand up for your faith and hold to your values even though some might make fun of you? Will you be a leader in your school or on your team or will you be content to be a follower? Will you be a courageous follower of Christ in your school?

Maybe you're not even a follower of Christ. We'd love to show you how He can become your Forgiver and your Leader. If you want to commit to be a courageous follower of Christ, I want you to stand to your feet right now.

Now, everyone please stand.

We're going to sing a song of invitation. If have never come to the place where you have asked Christ to be your Forgiver and Leader, we want to show you how you can do that today. If God has spoken to you about another commitment, we'd like to pray with you, too. You come as we sing.