

“The Rise of Joshua”

By: Keith Keyser

“We never hear of great men until the time when all other men are small,” wrote the late nineteenth century British author Gilbert Keith Chesterton. Momentous times produce leaders of renown. Joshua came on the scene when Israel desperately needed spiritual, courageous leadership. Moses, Aaron, & the rest of the old guard (except the venerable Caleb) had passed on, and the nation was on the verge of a major military campaign to occupy the promised land. The Son of Nun had been the heir-apparent to Moses’ leadership position for sometime; now God brought him to the forefront of national affairs. Numbers 27:18-21 indicates this change in power: “And the Lord said unto Moses, Take thee Joshua the son of Nun, a man in whom is the spirit, and lay thine hand upon him; And set him before Eleazar the priest, and before all the congregation; and give him a charge in their sight. And thou shalt put some of thine honor upon him, that all the congregation of the children of Israel may be obedient. And he shall stand before Eleazar the priest, who shall ask counsel for him after the judgment of Urim before the Lord: at his word shall they go out, and at his word they shall come in, both he, and all the children of Israel with him, even all the congregation.”

As with all great leaders, Joshua had formative experiences that shaped his character and prepared him for his future role as a general and ruler. His early successes as a warrior, coupled with his devotion to the Lord and Moses, equipped him for a glorious career as the Conqueror of Canaan. Perceiving the importance of Joshua’s training under Moses is an essential prerequisite for understanding the mature leader who took Israel into the Promise Land.

Joshua: The Warrior

Significantly, the first time one reads of Joshua is in a martial context (most scholars agree that he was probably about forty-five years old at this time.) Ex.17:8-16 details the insidious attack upon Israel by their inveterate enemies, the Amalekites. Israel vanquished their foes by looking to the Lord for help. Overlooking the battlefield, Moses sat upon a rock with the rod of God and his own hands raised; below in the thick of the fight, Joshua led the troops into combat. The combination of the former’s intercession with the latter’s bravery proved to be lethal to the marauding Amalekites. The scriptural account concludes with these significant words: “And Joshua broke the power of Amalek and his people with the edge of the sword. And Jehovah said to Moses, Write this [for] a memorial in the book, and rehearse [it] in the ears of Joshua, that I will utterly blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under the heavens. And Moses built an altar, and called the name of it Jehovah-nissi. And he said, For the hand is on the throne of Jah; Jehovah will have war with Amalek from generation to generation!” (Ex.17:13-16, JND.) Joshua was never to forget the treachery of Amalek and their destiny to be wiped out by the Lord’s forces wherever they might be found. This incident also bolstered his confidence in the power of God, who would be the source of all of his future victories.

Joshua: The Understudy

The Bible is filled with stories of mentors and protégés such as Samuel and David, Elijah and Elisha, and Paul and Timothy. For a young believer to have spiritual guidance from an older, more seasoned man or woman of God, is a very valuable asset. These wise veterans of the pathway of faith provide warnings against potential pitfalls, correction for mistakes, and encouraging words in times of distress. In his early days we find that Joshua was continually in the presence of Moses as his devoted helper. From accompanying with the meekest man on the earth, Joshua learned important lessons of patient restraint and decisive action. When Moses went up Mount Sinai to meet with God, Joshua accompanied him part way, and faithfully awaited his return. (Ex.24:13.) Already, Joshua was known as Moses' "attendant" (or "servant" according to other translations.) While the nation below was reveling in their idolatry and other immoral celebrations, the Son of Nun was occupied with the spiritual activities on the mount. Although he could not ascend all the way with Moses, he was as near as possible. Even at this early stage in his career, he was concerned with the things of God.

It is important that Christians devote themselves to spiritual things as soon as possible. Attendance at the meetings of the local assembly, personal Bible study, prayer, serving others, and witnessing are all activities to which young Christians need to dedicate themselves. Preparations are often made for secular vocations, but how much do believers today get ready for spiritual service? Many times young Christians go through academic training to become equipped for the Lord's work. Apart from real life experience, however, this can result in top-heavy Christianity (that is, mental faculties that are overdeveloped at the expense of practical spiritual growth.) Joshua's training took place in the company of an experienced man of God in the midst of the real struggles of daily life. Everyday problems taught him dependence on the Lord.

That Joshua benefited from spending time with Moses was apparent during their descent of the mount. When the two men heard noise in the camp, the younger warrior mistook the noise for battle. The elder man correctly identified it as singing. Moses had been forewarned by God of the Israelites' sin. Thus, he told Joshua the real situation: Israel was engaging in shameful debauchery around the Golden Calf. The mentor's wisdom instructed the young man, and gave him a valuable lesson in discernment. Moses further taught Joshua to esteem the Lord's honor and the good of the people above personal zeal for his own reputation and clout. When the Lord appointed seventy of the elders to assist Moses in governing the people, two of these men remained in the camp, prophesying (as opposed to doing this at the Tabernacle.) The Son of Nun saw this as a threat to his teacher's authority. Moses corrected him, however, saying "Are you zealous for my sake? Oh, that all the Lord's people were prophets and that the Lord would put His Spirit upon them!" (Num.11:29, NKJV) This correction reminds one of a similar lesson that the disciples learned from the Lord Jesus (Mk.9:38-39.) A student's loyalty should be to God alone with no taint of parochial or sectarian attitudes.

Joshua: Zealous for the person of God

Ex.33 records for us Moses pitching the “Tent of Meeting’ in order to speak with the Lord. When he departed from the Tent, verse eleven tells the reader that “his servant Joshua, the son of Nun, a young man, departed not out of the tabernacle.” Most commentators agree that he stayed behind to guard the holy site. Whether this be the reason, or whether he remained there to worship, one can see his keen interest in this holy place where God’s glory was regularly seen.

Joshua: The Faithful Spy

Certainly the most famous incident in the Son of Nun’s early career was his participation in the military reconnaissance of Canaan. Twelve spies were selected to go on this mission, which required exploration skills, stealth, and courage. Each of the tribes produced a prince for this arduous scouting assignment. The fact that Joshua was among them gives an indication of his importance to his native tribe, Ephraim. Like his celebrated ancestor Joseph, Joshua was a dependable man who succeeded in every undertaking. Young believers need to remember that God’s way is to begin with faithfulness in small tasks and then take on greater responsibility as the Lord leads. In the parable of the ten pounds the Lord Jesus commended the wise servant, saying: “...because thou hast been faithful in that which is least, be thou in authority over ten cities.” (Lk.19:17, JND) The servants chosen to distribute aid to the early church’s widows were selected because they had previously proved themselves to be “of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom.” (Acts 6:3, NKJV) Similarly, an elder was not to be “a novice.” (1 Tim.3:6) Advancement in the things of God is based upon reliability in past service.

At the time of this event, he was still called “Oshea” (meaning “Deliverance/Salvation.”) In honor of his past devotion to God and recognizing his future exploits in dependence on the Almighty, Moses re-named him “Jehoshua” (shortened to “Joshua”--“Salvation of Jah.” See Num.11:16.) Similar to the elongation of “Abram” (“High Father”) to Abraham (“Father of a Multitude”), this new moniker reflected greater trust in the Lord with better results. The name was a harbinger of the bright future ahead when Moses’ trustworthy aide-de-camp would succeed his mentor as commander in chief.

Caleb and Joshua agreed that the task was achievable. When the other ten spies began to argue against the mission, Caleb urged the people to obey the Lord, saying: “...Let us go up at once, and possess it; for we are well able to overcome it.” (Num.13:30) Nevertheless, the other scouts reasoned based on sight, affirming that the odds of success were negligible. They told a tale of giants and mighty, fortified cities. The two faithful spies asserted that God would give Israel the victory no matter what foes they faced. To the detriment of the nation, human reasoning and emotion prevailed in the discussion. The Israelites wept and said the unthinkable: “Would God that we had died in the land of Egypt! or would God we had died in this wilderness! And wherefore hath the LORD brought us unto this land, to fall by the sword, that our wives and our children should be a

prey? were it not better for us to return into Egypt? And they said one to another, Let us make a captain, and let us return into Egypt.” (Num.14:2-4) This apostasy resulted in that entire adult generation missing the opportunity to enter the Promised Land. Moses and Aaron mourned, and Joshua and Caleb tore their clothes in grief. Only these latter two would make it into their inheritance. Sadly they would have to wait forty years in order to enter Canaan.

This tragic story reminds one that the godly often find themselves in the minority. Even when others depart, however, the Christian must side with the Lord by obeying His Word. Joshua and Caleb withstood enormous peer pressure, and remained faithful to the One Who delivered them from Egypt. Consequently, He honored their loyalty by preserving them for the conquest of the Land.

The Commission

The early career of Joshua, marked by numerous celebrated deeds, led into a brighter future as the great leader of Israel into the Promised Land. Before his death, Moses commissioned his right-hand lieutenant to “Be strong and of a good courage: for thou must go with this people unto the land which the LORD hath sworn unto their fathers to give them; and thou shalt cause them to inherit it. And the LORD, he it is that doth go before thee; he will be with thee, he will not fail thee, neither forsake thee: fear not, neither be dismayed.” (Dt.31:7-8) It is delightful to read these final words from the older servant to his replacement; they are entirely without envy or ill feeling. Moses had done his part in preparing the next generation of leadership, and Joshua had responded with steady spiritual growth. Likewise, it is imperative that the elders of today’s assemblies pass on the truth and the responsibility to capable younger men. 2 Tim.2:2 sets forth this truth: “And the things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also.”

The well-crafted words of John McClintock and James Strong, two biblical scholars of a bygone era, are a fitting summary of the Son of Nun’s exceptional career: “Joshua's life has been noted as one of the very few which are recorded in history with some fullness of detail, yet without any stain upon them. In his character have been traced, under an Oriental garb, such features as chiefly kindled the imagination of Western chroniclers and poets in the Middle Ages: the character of a devout warrior, blameless and fearless, who has been taught by serving as a youth how to command as a man; who earns by manly vigor a quiet, honored old age; who combines strength with gentleness, ever looking up for and obeying the divine impulse with the simplicity of a child, while he wields great power and directs it calmly, and without swerving, to the accomplishment of a high, unselfish purpose.” (Article on “Joshua”, John McClintock and James Strong, *The Cyclopaedia of Biblical, Theological, & Ecclesiastical Literature*, CD-ROM edition, Ages Digital Software, 2000.)