

Taking Hold of the Promise

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This is our third part of a sermon series on Joshua and his preparation for being leader of Israel after Moses. We have seen how Joshua was by Moses's side as he went into the presence of the LORD for guidance and help. He was the first person to see Moses each time that he came out of God's presence, radiant from the encounter with this holy, living God. We have seen that Joshua knew that the battle he fought with the Amalekites was only won because Moses held high the staff of God's authority, showing that it was the spiritual battle that was critical to victory that day. God instructed Moses to ensure that Joshua remembered that the LORD was his banner.

In our passage today, we are looking at Joshua's next bit of training or preparation for serving the LORD: the importance of holding onto God's promise.

So what does this passage teach us about this.

1. Know what He has promised ...

Israel was in this place because of a promise made to a man called Abram, later called Abraham, whose story is told to us in detail in the book of Genesis. This promise started like this:

The LORD said to Abram, "**Leave your country**, your people and your father's household **and go to the land I will show you**. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing." Genesis 12:1-2

We see here the start of covenant relationship: Abram would agree to follow God's ways, and God would bless him in extraordinary ways. There was sacrifice involved in Abram's obedience; it must have cost him to separate from the life and people he had known to set out and go wherever God showed him to go. It was giving up a degree of self-determination and independent action, but in the best possible way. For when God is leading us, we are being led with the ultimate wisdom and understanding of the one who was before all things, who knows all things, and knows us better than anyone can. Better than we even know ourselves, for God knows what we can and will become as we trust Him and are gently changed by knowing Him.

Abram was to leave what he knew, and go where God led. That was his part of the covenant. God's part is epic: God promised to make Abram into a great nation. This promise was given again in Genesis 13:

Abram went to the land of Canaan and the LORD said to him, "**Lift up your eyes from where you are and look** north and south, east and west. All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring for ever. I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted. **Go, walk through** the length and breadth of the land, for I am giving it to you." Genesis 13:14-17

Abram had chosen God's ways, and knew very clearly what God's promise to him was, but Abram could not see how this word could be fulfilled as he and his wife had no children and were getting old. This is where faith matters: the promise was clear, but the fulfilment was not. It was all based on trust that God would bridge that gap between a certain promise and an uncertain fulfilment. Abram brought his concern to God in Genesis 15:1-6, and God reiterated the promise:

“... a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir.” He took Abram outside and said, “Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them.” Then He said to him, “So shall your offspring be.”

Abram believed the Lord, and God credited it to him as righteousness.

Abram’s acceptance of God’s word, both in thought and deed, was called righteousness. It doesn’t mean that he followed God perfectly, or that he always held onto the promise perfectly – on the contrary, Abram and his wife took their own steps to fulfil the promise without God - but it does mean that when we are in that place of trusting God’s word and responding to it with our obedience, then we are in the right place with God.

Abram did indeed father a son with his wife, a boy that was clearly God’s gift to them. This son, Isaac, went onto have twin sons, and one of those boys, Jacob, went onto have twelve sons. Each of those twelve sons was the founder of a tribe of Israel. God’s promise for numerous descendants was being fulfilled. But the promise of a land of their own was only coming to fulfilment at the point of this passage.

God had promised the people of Israel a fruitful land, that would be theirs. He promised to be their God and bless them, as part of a covenant agreement. He promised to deliver them from enemies, to provide for them, to bless them and keep them. Their part of the covenant was to follow His ways, which were entirely meant for their well-being, and He would bring the riches of His goodness and presence to bear on their lives.

2. Know what God does not promise...

If the matter finished there, the situation would have been very different. But it didn’t. God did not and does not promise us a trouble-free life. Since Eve and Adam had to live Eden because of their sin, trouble-free life does not exist on Earth.

The twelve leaders in our passage reported that the land God had for them was indeed fruitful and prosperous. It was not just good, it was exceedingly good. But God had not promised them a new Eden on Earth: a perfect place without challenge or conflict. This land was part of a fallen world, and the people who inhabited the land at that point did not acknowledge the Living God, but worshipped the Baals and Ashtoreth, amongst others, and the practices that involved were pretty grim.

Entering the land God promised them would involve confronting challenge, and this caused a split in opinion about whether to take hold of God’s promise or not.

Caleb and Joshua looked at who God had proven Himself to be, and trusted that as they stepped out in obedience God would do all that they could not do. They were willing to trust in the God who they had seen supernaturally part the Red Sea to deliver Israel from slavery, who had made bitter waters sweet to drink and who had provided manna to eat in the wilderness.

For the other ten leaders, I think we are looking at something more than fear at work. I spoke to someone recently whose medical consultant was recommending a treatment that would be an ordeal. Although it should bring a good outcome, there was great fear about the treatment. However, when this person knew God’s leading to go ahead with the treatment, he agreed without any further discussion. Knowing God’s will settled the matter for him. Fear did not go away, but this person knew God and trusted His leading. If that was what God said was right, this person would obey and overcome in the faith that God would be with him

every step of the way. They chose to take hold of God's character and God's promises and that changed their response to fear. This person gave God the authority and lordship of the matter, thus taking authority and lordship away from fear.

Fear can be managed. With difficulty, no doubt, but God is greater than fear. What we see here is that the ten leaders who had explored the land with Caleb and Joshua did not trust God to bring about a good outcome.

Whether or not the people in the land were giants or not, that was certainly how these ten leaders perceived them. They saw God's idea as being one where a group of grasshoppers, small and easily crushed, would go into combat against giants.

They looked at how they felt and based their opinion and decision on that. They believed that they *could* not overcome, therefore they should not go. The ten leaders who took this stand, then did what they could to ensure that the people of Israel agreed with them. After the public meeting, they spread 'a bad report' of the land amongst the people. There was no mention of the fruitfulness of the land, no mention of the miracles they had seen God perform, no mention of witnessing the presence of God; only an entirely negative account of Israel's ability to succeed. The result of their work was this:

‘That night all the members of the community raised their voices and wept aloud. 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 wilderness! Why is the Lord bringing us to this land only to let us fall by the sword? ... Wouldn't it be better for us to go back to Egypt?” And they said to each other, “We should choose a leader and go back to Egypt.” (14:1-4)

This was not a new response from the people.

God had miraculously delivered the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt and was preparing them for the Promised Land. However, God's chosen route was not the direct one because that would have taken them into the Philistine lands, and God's view was that the threat of war with them might cause the people to return to Egypt. Instead, God led them through the desert until the time when they were equipped to enter the Promised Land. (Exodus 13:17-18) The people did not like the desert. Whenever a challenge arose, the people of Israel complained and looked back to the golden days in Egypt.

In Exodus 16:3, the Israelites complained, “If only we had died by the LORD's hand in Egypt! There we sat round pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death.”

In Exodus 17:3, they complained, “Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst?”

In Numbers 11:4-9, they complained, “If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost – also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic.”

Well, yes, the land of Egypt was fruitful, but it was the place where they were slaves. In Exodus 1, we read that Pharaoh had oppressed them, making their lives 'bitter with hard labour in brick and mortar and with all kinds of work in the fields; in all their hard labour the Egyptians used them ruthlessly.' (Ex.1:13-14) Pharaoh had even insisted on all Israelite boys being killed at birth. Pharaoh wanted Israel to decrease in number and destroy any military capability they had that might be used against him.

Yet Israel *chose* to remember the food in Egypt. They *chose* not mention or remember the burdens of slavery that crushed them and had caused them to cry out to God for deliverance. They *chose* not to remember the horrific murder of baby sons that Pharaoh ordered.

They *chose* not remember God's miraculous deliverance of them, or His miraculous provision for them in the desert.

There was no point where the people as a whole considered that God might bring them victory and life in their own land, according to His promise to Abraham and his descendants. They were simply considering, where do we want to die? And they were prepared to die in the wilderness or in Egypt, but not in entering the land God promised them.

Essentially, we are seeing the people not only refuse to take hold of the promise, but they rejected God.

It's impossible to imagine how painful that would have been to God. For generations He had planned to fulfil this beautiful promise to the people, but they did not want it. The desire of the people was to go back to the land of their oppression or to stay in the desert. His desire was to bless them and pour out His goodness upon them, but they accused Him of wanting their deaths in this land.

How many were against entering the Promised Land? In Numbers 1:45-46, we find that the number of men of fighting age (20 years old and above) totalled 603,550. If the reference to the whole assembly of Israel includes the rest of the people, then surely we are looking at over a million people not just grumbling, but discussing stoning Moses, Aaron, Caleb and Joshua to death.

As we see in the passage, God intervened. The people had freewill, and the desire they held was to die in the wilderness, so God agreed to let that happen.

Caleb and Joshua knew that there would now be a delay in the promise being fulfilled, but it would still be fulfilled.

3. Having an overcoming spirit of faith

This series of events happened in the distant past, and this choice is not ours, so I want to draw out some points that we need to consider if we want to be amongst those who take hold of God's promises.

Firstly, we have a choice. We have freewill. If we ignore or reject God's ways or promises, we are fully entitled to do so. We can walk away from God. It is our choice.

We also have the freewill to choose Him, to take hold of Him and all the riches of His kingdom. We can choose to take hold of His promises of guidance, protection, provision, strength, grace, joy, wholeness and so much more. What we see so strongly with Joshua and Caleb is that their choice to take hold of God and His promise was fuelled by the **desire** to receive all that God had for him and for the nation. They were **determined** to see His kingdom come on Earth as in Heaven; to see His goodness in the land of the living (Ps.27). When the rest of the people rejected God, Joshua and Caleb were **steadfast**. They had chosen God and they would not be moved from that position.

If we turn to Hebrews 11:6 in the New Testament, we find this statement:

'... without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to Him must believe **that He exists** and that **He rewards those who earnestly seek Him.**'

We see the massive difference between the four men steadfastly choosing God's ways and the rest of the people here. Israel had seen the Living God at work time and time again for their benefit, but that had not impacted their hearts. They did not earnestly seek Him. They were not passionate about Him. Left to themselves, they were quite happy to make themselves a calf-shaped god to worship.

Later in that chapter, we read that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob,

'... admitted that they were ... strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were **longing for a better country – a heavenly one**. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them.' Hebrews 11:13-16

Israel did not long for a better country. They did not long for the promises of God to be fulfilled. They wanted to go back to a place and time before God had delivered them from slavery.

It is an odd phrase to describe believers as 'strangers on Earth,' but the point being made is that this life now is for a time. What God offers us for eternity, is the perfect existence He always intended for us to have.

If there is one thing to take away from this passage, take with you the importance of being passionate about our God. We need desire to enter into His presence, to desire His guidance and goodness. It is that desire that causes us to refuse to settle for less than God's best for our lives. It is that desire that stops us from walking away when things are hard and, instead, motivates us to push into all that God has for us. We do not need to be perfect, but we do need to be whole-hearted where God is concerned.

Let us be people who know, desire and take hold of God and His promises. Let us be people who see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living and, when life on Earth is done, walk into the perfect presence of our God as those who have overcome in faith to inherit all that He has promised.

Amen.

We are going to move into our time of intercessions now, but as those who take hold of God's promises. We are doing that because so often God's promises relate to a very real and desperate need that we have.

I am going to read a promise of God together and then we can speak it over the situations that concern us.

In Isaiah 41:10, God says, **"So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with My righteous right hand."**

I commit to God all that causes me to fear and be dismayed.

I proclaim that the LORD God Almighty is *my* God: my Saviour, Redeemer and Help in all trouble.

I take hold of God's promise now: that He will strengthen me and help me; He will uphold me with His righteous right hand.

In Psalm 9:9–10, we find that, **'The LORD is a refuge for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble. Those who know Your name trust in You, for You, LORD, have never forsaken those who seek You.'**

I commit to You, Lord, all those who are oppressed in the world and who are experiencing conflict.

I take hold of Your promise that You will be a refuge and stronghold for them.

I proclaim that You know each one of them by name, and I pray that they will know Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit.

I take hold of your promise that You never forsake those who seek You. Strengthen us here, and all those around the world who know You by name.

We pray this in Jesus' name,

Amen.